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Introduction by Thomas Noer

**Ryan M. Irwin. *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order.*** New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780199855612 (hardcover, \$45.00).

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Introduction by Thomas Noer, Carthage College

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**M**any years ago (when dinosaurs still roamed the earth) I was a young graduate student at my first conference of The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. At one of the sessions we were told to divide into areas of geographic concentration. As groups of scholars moved to the Asian, European, and Middle East conclaves, I was left standing alone. Finally I asked the Chair where should the Africanists go? He pondered and suggested maybe I could sit-in with the Latin Americanists. I decided to visit the book display. Shortly after I wrote an essay suggesting that Africa remained “the dark continent” for historians of American foreign policy.

In the decades since, there has been an impressive outpouring of studies of U.S. policies towards the continent, many emphasizing the impact of racial considerations on American actions. Two of the larger issues that have been examined are Washington’s response to decolonization and the nation’s policies towards the apartheid regime in South Africa. Ryan Irwin’s provocative new book combines both topics in an intriguing manor. His book and the perceptive comments of four noted scholars attest not only to the growth of work on the U.S. and Africa, but to the increased sophistication in this field.

Based on the title I expected this to be a study of non-governmental groups and their efforts to persuade Washington to impose economic sanctions and join other nations in pressuring for change in South Africa. While Irwin does note the influence of pressure groups, his book is far more than a history of lobbying and reaction. He argues that South Africa was not just an isolated problem for the U.S. but a defining issue in the entire Cold War era: “. . . the story of the global apartheid debate offers a widow to consider events of the late twentieth century” (13). Specifically, the united efforts of decolonized nations to eliminate apartheid “exposed the prejudices that quietly underpinned America’s liberal world order,” led U.S. leaders to question their assumption that the United Nations and other international organizations could help create a “pro-American consensus,” and ultimately led to “the unmaking of America’s liberal world order” (12). According to Irwin, “The contest over South Africa’s future exposed the uneven nature and the inherent contradictions of American hegemony after World War II, as well as the multifarious ways that diplomats, policymakers, and activists traversed the context of their times” (188).

The elevation of the anti-apartheid movement to the instrument that demolished America’s “liberal world order” is a strong claim and, at times, is a bit exaggerated. Irwin, however, makes a powerful case for the significance of the issue not only to American diplomatic and economic policies but also to an understanding of the connections between U.S. actions and global issues. As he notes, the book “seeks to establish a bridge between African and American international history” (9).

One of the many strengths of Irwin’s book is to demonstrate the complexity of the issue. Debate over the correct strategy to eliminate apartheid led to splits within both black and white opposition groups in South Africa, conflicts among independent African nations, division within the U.S. government, factionalism in the United Nations, and tension

between Washington and its European allies. The author manages to analyze these numerous struggles without losing the reader in the detail.

The reviewers are unanimous in their praise for the book, but occasionally skeptical about some of the author's conclusions. Jamie Miller judges the book "an original and eminently readable work of uncommon scope and conceptual breath." To Andy DeRoche it is "an insightful and thought-provoking analysis." Jeffrey Bryne argues that the work "makes a very important contribution to our understanding of how decolonization altered some of the most fundamental structures of global society." Tim Borstelmann concludes "the book offers a truly transnational perspective on apartheid." Christopher Lee finds the work "of admirable subtlety" that "provides a new paradigm" for understanding the anti-apartheid struggle. The fact that five different critics all offer 'dust jacket blurb' raves attests to the quality of Irwin's efforts.

Each of the respondents, however, also raises some concerns. Miller argues that extending the work into the 1970s might have provided a stronger test of Irwin's thesis and makes the case that the "East-West binary" was not totally displaced by "decolonization imperatives." These both seem to be sound suggestions.

Although he includes some excellent discussion of the book's thesis, Andy DeRoche shifts the focus of his review to research. He cites a number of works that would have strengthened the book and makes a strong argument for their importance. He also offers a convincing case for the benefits of multi-archival and multi-national sources and notes that Irwin's international research strengthens his conclusions.

Like Jamie Miller, Jeffrey Byrne suggests that a lengthier book might have been better. (It is rare that reviewers want *longer* books.) In particular, he points out that early emphasis on the African National Congress (ANC) and other African groups is gradually abandoned and that the author needs to be clearer in identifying groups and issues rather than moving at "breakneck pace." A longer study might also have tested the idea that by the late 1960s Washington had "capitulated in the battle for the soul of the developing world."

Tim Borstelmann makes a number of significant points about the history of apartheid and the history of those who opposed it. First, he reminds us that South Africa was *sui generis*, far different from any other white-governed colony. This made the campaign for majority rule in the nation not only unique but also far more difficult than in other areas. Second, he notes a need for more attention to "the role of economics and geostrategy in the U.S.- South Africa relationship." Like Bryne, who contends Irwin's book is not "old fashioned enough," Borsetelmann implies that new paradigms need also to consider traditional ones. Economics and strategic considerations continued even as new assumptions and issues evolved. America's "liberal world order" may have died, but, if so, it was a long and slow death.

Christopher Lee notes Irwin's dual focus on international relations and the shifting nature of liberation groups within South Africa. As a result, the book is both "diplomatic" and "social" history and "invites audiences from African studies, diplomatic history,

international history, and American history.” He reaffirms Irwin’s contention that apartheid was “an enduring global problem of racial prejudice that, in turn, demanded a global response.”

Irwin’s intriguing book and the reviewers’ insightful responses attest to the vast changes in the study of U.S. foreign relations in the past decades. American foreign policy can no longer be examined in isolation, but only within a global framework. This makes our work far more difficult, but ultimately of much greater significance. Those studying American foreign relations are no longer able to divide into areas of “geographic concentration,” but now must gather in one very large and complex room.

### Participants:

**Tom Noer** is the Valor Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Carthage College. He is the author of *Soapy: A Biography of G. Mennen Williams*, (University of Michigan Press, 2005) *Cold War and Black Liberation: The United States and White Rule in Africa, 1948-1968* (University of Missouri Press, 1985) and *Briton, Boer, and Yankee: The United States and South Africa, 1870-1914* (Kent State University Press, 1978). He is currently working on a study of the politics of Frank Lloyd Wright.

**Ryan M. Irwin** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Albany-SUNY. He received his PhD from Ohio State University. His scholarship explores the historical relationship between globalization and decolonization, most specifically about the changing mechanics and shifting perceptions of American global power, but his interests cover comparative imperialism, international institutions, non-state activism, and technological development. His current project is an intellectual history of the mid-1970s, as well as a political history about the growth and transformation of the nation-state during the mid-twentieth century.

**Thomas (“Tim”) Borstelmann** has been the Elwood N. and Katherine Thompson Distinguished Professor of Modern World History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln since 2003. He spent the previous twelve years as a member of the History Department at Cornell University, after earning his B.A. from Stanford and his Ph.D. from Duke. His first book, *Apartheid’s Reluctant Uncle: The United States and Southern Africa in the Early Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 1993) won SHAFR’s Stuart Bernath Prize. Borstelmann has also published *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Harvard University Press, 2001), and *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton University Press, 2012), in addition to coauthoring *Created Equal: A Social and Political History of the United States* (Pearson Longman Publishers, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2010). He is currently at work on a book about how Americans have understood non-Americans.

**Jeffrey James Byrne** is Assistant Professor of History at the University of British Columbia. He received his Ph.D. from the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2011. He has written on the modern international history of the developing world for *Diplomatic History*, *The International Journal of Middle East Studies*, and several edited

volumes. His first book, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Project*, is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

**Andy DeRoche** earned his Ph.D. in diplomatic history from the University of Colorado (CU) in 1997. He is a full-time history instructor at Front Range Community College and a part-time lecturer in international affairs at CU. His most recent book is a biography of Andrew Young, and his latest article is “Embracing Ubuntu: How a White Gen Xer from Maine Learned about Race and Married a Zambian Women,” in Elwood Watson, editor, *Generation X Professors Speak: Voices from Academia* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 95-116.

**Christopher J. Lee** is a lecturer in the Department of International Relations and at the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (CISA) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He is the editor of *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (2010).

**Jamie Miller** is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Cambridge as well as a visiting Fox International Fellow at Yale University. His dissertation looks at the strategies used by South Africa to preserve its apartheid regime in the early years of the Cold War in Southern Africa (1974-1980). He won the Saki Ruth Dockrill Memorial Prize for best paper at the University of California Santa Barbara - London School of Economics - George Washington University International Graduate Conference on the Cold War (2011) and has articles in *Cold War History* (2012) and the *Journal of Cold War Studies* (forthcoming, spring 2013).

**W**hy did apartheid last so long? Decolonization rolled through Asia, the Middle East, and Africa in the first two decades after the end of World War II. But then the process slowed to a crawl at the Zambezi River, leaving white authorities in control of Rhodesia, the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, South West Africa (Namibia), and South Africa. Ten more years of difficult warfare finally won the liberation of Angola and Mozambique in 1975. Five years and much hard fighting later, Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. Then it took still another decade to bring nonracial democracy to South Africa and its colony, Namibia. Why so long?

Part of the answer stems from demographics. White settlers and their descendants in South Africa constituted almost twenty percent of the nation’s population, in contrast to the tiny handful of white officials in most overseas European colonies and even to the larger white settler communities in such territories as the highlands of Kenya and the Mediterranean littoral of Algeria. Yet unlike the United States or Canada, the European settlement in South Africa did not unfold across the Atlantic Ocean divide in a different hemisphere vulnerable to ‘Old World’ pathogens, so the indigenous inhabitants—Africans—were not decimated by disease as were the indigenous inhabitants—Native Americans or First Peoples—in North America. So South Africa did not become a primarily white country, but its robust white element dominated the nation’s politics, its industrial economy (by far the largest in Africa), and its powerful military forces. South Africa was *sui generis*, neither a typical European overseas colony nor a typical white settler state. Historians refer to its distinctive racial demographics and history as a form of internal colonialism, which spawned an unusually pervasive and intractable form of white minority rule.

Part of the answer to the question “Why so long?” stems from earlier history. Following the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, the British Empire assembled the four distinct territories in the region into a largely self-governing Union of South Africa. Becoming essentially independent in 1910, at the very apex of white rule around the globe, South Africa was assured that its internal system of segregation and white rule received little criticism or notice. Such apparent international legitimacy was quite different from the fiercely negative world reaction to white Rhodesians’ “Unilateral Declaration of Independence” in 1965, an effort at creating a new nation, 95% African but ruled by whites, at the very peak of the global movement for national self-determination. When South Africa encountered growing international criticism of its post-1948 apartheid policies, its government quit the British Commonwealth in 1961 and renamed the country the Republic of South Africa.

And part of the answer stems from the global politics of the Cold War, a time frame that matched up almost precisely with that of apartheid (1948-1990). White-ruled South Africa considered itself an outpost of Western civilization at the tip of the so-called dark continent, espousing enthusiastic anticommunism and allying itself closely with the United States as a major producer of uranium, gold, and other extremely valuable and strategic minerals. For all their growing unease with the brutalities and injustices of apartheid, U.S.

and British officials were loath to alienate an important strategic and economic ally. South Africa became the most explicitly unfree part of the much-touted 'free world,' a thumb in the eye to anticolonial campaigners for national self-determination, democratic governance, and human rights. South Africa provided the stiffest challenge to the U.S. strategy of trying to win to its side in the Cold War both the former colonialists and the former colonies—an effort to lure the loyalties of both ends of the older North-South axis of world politics over to the West end of the newer East-West axis. The United States did not enact full economic sanctions against South Africa until 1986 (over President Ronald Reagan's veto), just four years before African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela walked out of prison and apartheid was swept into the dustbin of history.

Ryan Irwin's excellent new book, *Gordian Knot*, examines the global debate about apartheid during the 1960s, the middle years of the apartheid era, and offers a detailed accounting of how conflicting currents in Africa, Asia, and the West helped allow white rule in South Africa to survive as long as it did. Irwin notes that "apartheid challenged the very idea that history was moving in a linear fashion toward a political order based on territorial liberation, racial equality, and economic development" (117). Apartheid's persistence in an era of rising human equality seemed perverse to most observers—an extraordinary last holdout in the waning moments of a half-millennium of formal white control of nonwhite peoples across the globe. It seemed most perverse of all to the nonwhite majority of the world's population, particularly Africans—in South Africa, in the neighboring white-ruled territories, and in the newly liberated nations north of the Zambezi River. Indeed, apartheid became a rallying point. "Just as anticommunism animated Washington's Cold War and anticapitalism oriented Moscow's stance abroad, the fight against apartheid gave form to the political project known as the Third World" (5).

Irwin persuasively insists on the importance of the years from the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 through the beginning of the Richard Nixon administration in 1969. He traces a story that divides the decade essentially in half: for the first five years, the South African government came under growing internal and especially external pressure to move away from apartheid and to give up its colonial rule of neighboring South West Africa. Pretoria was on the defensive; newly independent African nations were confident and seemingly unified; and the Kennedy and Johnson administrations seriously considered having to take a significantly tougher stand toward the apartheid regime, perhaps including economic sanctions. Then, Irwin argues, the second half of the decade witnessed a reversal of these trends. The African nations that had taken an aggressive lead at the United Nations in trying to organize global pressure on South Africa began to lose their initiative, distracted by coups and other conflicts of governance. Meanwhile, the new South African government under John Vorster cleverly undercut its African opponents by using its industrial might to build mutually beneficial economic links to African nations. At the same time, Pretoria effectively repressed internal anti-apartheid guerilla activity. And the United States under the Johnson administration backed away from considering a tougher policy toward South Africa, distracted by the escalating war in Vietnam, black urban uprisings at home, broader economic pressures that raised the strategic value of South Africa's vast gold resources, and a declining sympathy with Third World nationalism even before the arrival of the Nixon administration. All of these factors contributed to what Irwin calls "the unmaking of

America's liberal world order" (12), particularly its eroding support for such organizations as the UN, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

Part of what Irwin has done is to rescue the historical specificity of the 1960s from the oft-recounted longer story of the struggle to have the apartheid regime's most important trading partner, the United States, impose economic sanctions on Pretoria. Irwin devotes an entire chapter to the International Court of Justice's surprising decision in 1966 regarding the status of South West Africa, in which the Court decided by an 8-7 vote not to consider the merits of the case—whether apartheid South Africa should continue to rule the territory as a result of its old League of Nations mandate—for technical reasons regarding the lack of legal standing of the two African nations officially bringing the case, Ethiopia and Liberia. The decision left South Africa legally in charge of South West Africa, free to continue its installation of apartheid policies beyond South Africa's own borders, and pulled the issue of apartheid out from its previous cover as a domestic issue of South Africa alone (the UN having been founded with an inherent tension between respecting national sovereignty and respecting human rights). Irwin credits the ICJ's decision on South West Africa—"arguably the most important decision in the Court's history" (104)—as a "watershed moment" (105) in the global struggle against apartheid. The decision brought an end, he argues, to the optimism of the early 1960s in which African and other nonwhite nations hoped that the UN would be the avenue to reform and justice in the international system. Instead, from the latter half of the 1960s onwards, leadership in the struggle against apartheid shifted away from other nations (India as well as African nations) toward non-governmental organizations, including the multi-racialist (rather than African nationalist) ANC abroad, and away from hopes for peaceful reform toward commitment to guerilla warfare as the only available path to eventual democracy in South Africa.

*Gordian Knot* is primarily a history of ideas and diplomacy. It is clearly and graciously written, and it does not suffer from the ills of postmodernist writing despite focusing a good deal on "discourses"—on language and identity, and on how knowledge of apartheid (and South African rule in South West Africa) and African nationalism were shaped and explained by different parties. To some extent, it is a history of the struggle between Afrikaner and African nationalisms. By contrast, it is not a history of land ownership, labor, demographics, income, or other material circumstances of life in South Africa (or South West Africa), and there is relatively little attention given to the role of economics and geostrategy in the U.S.-South African relationship. Readers already familiar with the essential outlines of apartheid's history are perhaps unlikely to find major surprises in this story, but they will certainly learn a great deal about the specific perspectives and actions of key African leaders, the U.S. government, and the United Nations. Irwin aims to explain "how a cross-section of governmental and nongovernmental elites employed discourse to build alliances, identify enemies, and lay claims on the international stage" (9). Some readers will no doubt cringe a little at the language of "employing discourse," while others may be a little troubled by the rather bloodless tone that "lingers not on the heroism of anti-apartheid activists but on the way universalisms became plural as different groups competed to define the meaning of the world they inhabited" (9). But Irwin sticks to his



guns, confident that his transnational story adds an important new layer to older histories with their more explicit framing of the human costs of apartheid.

*Gordian Knot* fits readily in the current trend in the writing of international history and the history of U.S. foreign relations. Grounded in multinational archival research, the book offers a truly transnational perspective on apartheid—that of South Africans, both for and against it, of Africans across the rest of the continent, of the British and U.S. governments, and of India and other non-European nations. Extensive archival work in the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa undergirds the book and its persistently transnational approach; Irwin uses the South African archives to particularly good effect. An excellent teaching tool to accompany this engaging history of “the conversation about South Africa during the 1960s” (5) is the recent seven-part documentary film from director Connie Field, *Have You Heard from Johannesburg?* (2010), which also addresses the making of the global anti-apartheid movement.

As we know now with greater certainty than was possible during the Cold War itself, the United States was always the much more powerful of the two superpowers. While not quite akin to the 'Upper Volta [Burkina Faso] with missiles,' as the pun went, the Soviet Union was still essentially an extremely large middle-income country devoting an unsustainable share of its national resources to military development in a desperate, ultimately futile effort to maintain some measure of parity with a much wealthier and more technologically vibrant competitor. Joseph Stalin had predicted at the end of World War II that each of the allies in the titanic struggle against fascism and Japanese expansionism would impose its own ideological system in those lands that its armies occupied, but while the Soviet Union claimed its fair share of the spoils of European and Asian territory, it was the United States that played the genuinely hegemonic role in shaping the overarching post-1945 international system. The founding of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions testified to the ideological ascendancy of American liberalism, while the fact of those bodies being headquartered in the U.S., and the various privileges enjoyed by Washington in their operation, were reminders of the raw geopolitical supremacy underpinning this new order.

As promised in the subtitle, Ryan Irwin's *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* is very much concerned with the collapse of that American-constructed system—or, perhaps more accurately, with its escape from Washington's grasp. The introduction evocatively describes an American world-system, built in the northern hemisphere, buckling under the weight of the pell-mell addition of dozens of new members from the southern hemisphere in the late 1950s and 1960s. On the one hand, the proliferation of national flags outside the UN headquarters in midtown Manhattan clearly constituted a vindication of the charter signed in San Francisco in 1945, but this expansion also augured the organisation's drift away from the post-World War Two concerns that were still the primary drivers of U.S. foreign policy. Irwin's goal, he explains, is to answer "one of the twentieth century's fundamental questions: How did the rapid growth of small, non-European nation-states at midcentury affect the international community?" (5). His compelling answer is that "the sudden emergence of almost forty non-European states constituted both the realization of America's postimperial vision of the world and a direct threat to Washington's continued hegemony" (12).

In order to prove his case, Irwin insightfully focuses on the matter of apartheid South Africa in international affairs over the course of the 1960s. Of course, South Africa was something of an oddity in African politics at the time, a glaring exception to the dominant narrative of decolonization. But it is precisely that controversial exceptionality that makes apartheid an excellent subject of study for his purposes, since the resulting debates and arguments exposed and interrogated concepts that a great many people preferred (and prefer still) to see retain the aura of consensus. As Irwin notes, "the apartheid system was controversial because it not only offended the conscience of leaders in the decolonized world ... By suggesting that economic progress and territorial autonomy could be accomplished without racial equality, South Africa's domestic race policies undermined the intellectual

rationale of the postcolonial nation itself” (6). Of course, those policies also challenged much of the moral basis for American hegemony, liberal internationalism. There can be few better illustrations of the tension between values and geopolitical interests.

That said, *Gordian Knot* does not at all present the tension between values and interests in an overly simplistic or moralizing fashion. On the contrary, for this reviewer one of the book’s most admirable qualities is that it properly conveys the moral ambiguities and political incertitudes of the late colonial and early postcolonial era. From the perspective of the present day, the rapidity and thoroughness of African decolonization can give it an air of inevitability that was not at all apparent to participants at the time—particularly with regard to the final form that decolonization took, namely the universalization of the European sovereign state paradigm throughout the continent. Even in the late 1950s, African and European political elites were still contemplating various alternative outcomes such as regional or Panafrikan federalism, or Euro-African ‘interdependence’ that would grant the colonies a very qualified kind of autonomy. Thus, momentarily setting aside the undeniably racist (as opposed to racialist) and oppressive nature of the apartheid state, South Africa was to some degree actually representative of the continent’s prevailing atmosphere of political experimentation and improvisation in the 1950s and 1960s.

The book’s first chapter describes how apartheid first flourished as a certain expression of anti-imperial Afrikaner nationalism in the interwar period, criticizing the contradiction between Britain’s liberal ideals and the reality of the British empire’s blatant exploitation of black labour (22-3). During this same general period, of course, Pan-Africanist activists such as the influential Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities (Imperial) League and the Black Star shipping line, were popularizing the notion of African self-reliance, a notion that provided some degree of cover for the Republic of South Africa’s (RSA) touting of ‘separate but equal’ development for each ‘race’. Completing an adept and ambiguous sweep of modern South African history, the chapter goes on to describe how the multiracial ANC found itself at the end of the 1950s positioned between the warring poles of the apartheid regime and the black nationalism of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) (34-38).

This pretext led to some magnificent rationales in the diplomatic sphere. Dr. Stefan Possony, an Austrian-born strategist from the Hoover Institution at Stanford University who testified on Pretoria’s behalf before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), evoked the era’s anticolonial rhetoric to *defend* apartheid rather than condemn it: “Mankind with all its diversities has never accepted a single writ. To impose a single formula would be ideological imperialism” (121). Consequently, some of *Gordian Knot*’s most intriguing passages are those that describe how the RSA’s complex variations on the sovereign state model—the incorporation of South West Africa and the granting of nominal autonomy to supposed national ‘homelands’ such as Transkei—earned a surprising degree of international acceptance. Perhaps most notably, the ICJ effectively ruled that the question of South West Africa did not fall under its jurisdiction, to the outrage of the African states and anti-apartheid activists that had brought the case to the court’s attention (123-4). In fact, the ICJ case constitutes an especially interesting episode. At one stage, the South Africans tried to turn the tables on their accusers by putting independent Africa itself on

trial, inviting the judges to visit several countries to the north in order to compare human development in the RSA to postcolonial “African realities” (115-6). It is perhaps reflective of a competitive global discourse—expressed on both sides of the Iron Curtain as well as both sides of the North-South divide—that political legitimacy seemed to rely so heavily on evidence of material prosperity and economic progress. To what degree, one wonders, did the terms of the rivalry between capitalism and communism influence the anticolonial agenda, or *vice versa*? Unfortunately, although this is hardly Irwin’s fault, the trial terminated before such inquiries were pursued.

As the author makes very clear, whatever international legitimacy South Africa enjoyed depended on the United States’ support. While he does demonstrate how the American civil rights movement did lead the John F. Kennedy and, significantly more so, Lyndon Johnson administrations to hesitantly participate in international condemnation of the apartheid state, Irwin gives a more convincing and more compelling account of moral drift in Washington. Certainly many American officials were themselves guilty of racial prejudice to varying degrees of severity, and Pretoria was able to win over a good number of them by capitalizing on disconcerting stories of racial violence elsewhere on the continent. The Algerian War of Independence and the “Belgian” Congo’s chaotic transition to independence, which horrified Westerners with news stories of violent black and Arab mobs setting upon whites, were particularly useful in this regard. One of the book’s more memorable quotations comes from a 1962 State Department policy paper titled “The White Redoubt” that described South Africa approvingly as “a last white stronghold against black invasion from the north and racist-inspired upheavals from within” (82-3). For Washington, the illiberal character of apartheid was counterbalanced by the fact that so many of its African opponents supported the use of violence, advocated socialism, and enjoyed good relations with the major communist countries—qualities also considered to be serious moral flaws. *Gordian Knot* therefore usefully demonstrates that Americans did not yet see South Africa primarily as a Manichean battle between oppressive racism and Nelson Mandela’s non-violent campaign for a democratic, multiracial “Rainbow Nation.” After all, in his famous 1964 Rivonia Trial speech, Mandela felt obliged to offer a vigorous defence of violent methods of resistance (albeit with great reservations), justify and praise the communist world’s support of his cause, and defend the ANC’s multiracial character from the criticism of South African black nationalists.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, the incertitudes of decolonizing Africa gave American policy makers an excuse to avoid making a moral choice and stick with “stable” South Africa. “In an area as volatile as Africa,” a 1962 policy paper asserted, “we make no sharp distinction between ‘enemies’ and ‘friends’, for today’s opponent may be tomorrow’s friend—or vice versa” (83).

At this point it is worth highlighting Irwin’s ambitious methodology and research agenda. His analysis is inherently complex for it concerns four areas: the African dimensions of the PAC-ANC rivalry, with the two competing for the support of the newly independent countries to the north, the efforts of African states and their Third World allies to shape the

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<sup>1</sup> See “Nelson Mandela’s statement from the dock at the opening of the defence case in the Rivonia Trial”, ANC website, <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=3430&t=Famous%20Speeches>

terms of global debate at the United Nations on a variety of issues (of which apartheid was but one), the interaction between American domestic politics and the apartheid issue, and Washington's geopolitical calculus with regard to the ongoing global containment of communism and shifting assessments of the importance of South African and black African friendship. The early chapters in particular also shift between differing perspectives, including that of RSA officials, American officials, ANC activists, and African politicians. It is here that Irwin's impressive research really bears fruit, as this multiplicity of perspectives and the sophistication of the resulting analysis simply would not be possible without the use of British, American, South African, and ANC archives.

On the whole, he also juggles these multiple levels of analysis very successfully. Matthew Connelly's *Diplomatic Revolution* was perhaps an important inspiration for *Gordian Knot*, for it shares that earlier work's adroit fusion of diplomatic history with a concern for discourse.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Irwin certainly demonstrates the importance of the war of words to geopolitics, and vice-versa, in the South African case. As Pretoria's ambassador in Washington, Willem Naude, observed in 1960, criticism of apartheid in the UN "goes deeper than a 'publicity problem with political overtones'... [Attacks on apartheid] have become a full scale international political problem affecting the survival of South Africa itself" (59). As Irwin notes, the African group's challenging, through the ICJ, of South Africa's right to "administer" the former League of Nations mandate of South West Africa was a case of Pretoria's governance literally being put on trial; with territorial sovereignty in the balance, the South Africans were not powerful enough to feign indifference to the outcome of the proceedings.

That said, I do have some reservations about the book's fairly strict focus. First, the ANC and African perspective seems to recede into the background after the initial chapters, so that the narrative's triangular dynamic between African nationalists, Pretoria, and the U.S. becomes more of a bilateral American-South African analysis. The latter two chapters focus much more on the bilateral U.S.-South African relationship and changes in American policy, culminating in the Nixon administration's decision to unapologetically strengthen its relationship with Pretoria. Granted, the evolution of U.S. policy is central to the book's overarching goal of charting the decline of American hegemony over the institutions of the (supposedly) liberal internationalist order, and the author establishes a compelling connection between Washington's attitudes toward, on the one hand, South Africa specifically and, on the other, the UN in a more general sense. The Nixon administration ushered a new phase in American foreign policy that treated the international institutions as a lost cause, that had been hijacked by Third World radicals who used issues like apartheid to criticize the West to communism's benefit. Irwin writes that "it was time, in [Henry] Kissinger's mind, for policymaking based on tangible material interests rather than the ethereal dictums of liberal internationalism" (167). This was an important development. Still, the paradoxically simultaneous disillusionment of those same Third World actors, many of whom came to the contrary conclusion that the UN system was in

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002),

fact rigged to preserve Western interests, receives comparatively short shrift here (though it is certainly not entirely neglected).

A related question that I would pose to the author is whether *Gordian Knot*'s narrative supports the argument that, by the end of the 1960s, the United States had essentially capitulated in the battle of the soul of the developing world that Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev had both so loudly committed to at the decade's beginning.

The second, also minor criticism that I would make is that the book is in some ways not 'old-fashioned' enough. It excels in its examination of transnational intellectual debates, the interaction between those debates and social change in the U.S., and the battle for global public opinion, but sometimes this reviewer wished for these dynamics to be more explicitly situated in the context of the more straightforward geopolitical and strategic interests that proved to be so determinative in the U.S.-South African relationship. It is true that these interests are fairly easily grasped, and Irwin understandably wants to focus on the original aspects of his contribution, but it is not always clear from the text how high these factors were on the foreign policy agenda relative to more prosaic concerns.

In the case of both of these criticisms, this desire for greater context may largely be a consequence of the book's concision. *Gordian Knot* is admirably lean—especially given the scope and complexity of its analysis—but might have been more comfortable with a little padding. Sometimes fairly obscure events and references can fly by at breakneck pace. For example, not all of those who ought to read this book may be intimately familiar with the numerous similarly-named Pan-African, All-African, or Afro-Asian conferences and summits that zip by in the late 1950s and early 1960s, though they did constitute important bellwethers of African politics and were essential forums for the 'debate' under examination. Conversely, while this reviewer knows the basic gist of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case that Irwin argues features prominently in the ICJ trial (117), such crucial references could bear a little elaboration.

In any case, it is surely the mark of a successful book that it leaves the reader persuaded but not sated, and this book is indeed a success. Its author gratifyingly connects numerous important concerns—decolonization, global race relations, liberal internationalism, Cold War geopolitics, superpower-client relations—while still preserving its clarity of purpose. He makes a compelling case that the apartheid question contributed greatly not only to a more generalized loss of faith in the UN system, but also to American policymakers' conscious rejection of their predecessors' design for the world. For that reason, *Gordian Knot* makes a very important contribution to our understanding of how decolonization altered some of the most fundamental structures of global society. Additionally, and perhaps no less significantly, is also an innovative example of African international history with its use of rare archival sources, combination of state and transnational perspectives, and global concerns. Irwin's is that rare tale that is less concerned with the international system's effect on Africa than Africa's lasting imprint on our world.

In *Gordian Knot*, Ryan Irwin has provided an insightful and thought-provoking analysis of the significance of the debates over apartheid in the 1960s. Irwin skillfully examines the machinations of the white government in Pretoria, the challenges from opposition organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC), and the evolving (and, under the Nixon administration, devolving) responses to these events by officials in Washington. This book is based on impressive research, is written in lively and engaging prose, and should be read carefully by anyone interested in 1960s international affairs, southern Africa, or race relations.

Among the many strengths of *Gordian Knot* is its depiction of events in South Africa and the brilliant explanation of the motives and goals on the part of officials in Pretoria and key critics such as the exiled ANC leader Oliver Tambo. Many other historians in the United States, such as Tim Borstelmann, Robert Massie, and Tom Noer, have powerfully portrayed the evolving reaction to apartheid in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Irwin discusses the American aspect of this drama equally well, but also includes extensive and exceptionally perceptive interpretations of the South African side(s) of the story. Irwin's explanation of the nuances of South African politics and policy-making is sensitive and illuminating, and reveals a firm grasp of the historical literature from a wide range of scholars such as Shula Marks and Jackie Grobler.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to detailing and discussing events and policymaking in Pretoria and Washington exceptionally well, Irwin goes a step further and considers what the apartheid debate meant for the rest of the 'Global South.' Irwin places apartheid at the epicenter of the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in a new and quite useful way. He begins this part of the story with the 1955 NAM conference in Bandung, continues through the early 1960s as the United Nations General Assembly became increasingly African and Asian, and then ends with the late 1960s counterrevolution led by President Richard Nixon in Washington and Prime Minister John Vorster in Pretoria. In doing so, Irwin makes a unique and very important contribution to scholarship that astutely places the apartheid debate into international context.

While Irwin's research is generally exceptional, there are a few surprising omissions. His discussion of American foreign policy in the early 1960s, when the Kennedy administration made halting efforts to confront Pretoria, would be stronger if it incorporated insights from

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<sup>1</sup> For example see Thomas Borstelmann, *Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Robert Massie, *Loosing the Bonds: The United States and South Africa in the Apartheid Years* (New York: Nan Talese, 1997); Thomas Noer, *Soapy: A Biography of G. Mennen Williams* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> See Jackie Grobler, *A Decisive Clash? A Short History of Black Protest in South Africa, 1875-1976* (Pretoria: Acacia Books, 1988); Shula Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in the Twentieth Century* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986).

Tom Zeiler's biography of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, which insightfully discusses South Africa and Rusk's views on race.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Irwin's analysis of the Johnson administration's response to Rhodesia's 1965 unilateral declaration of independence could have utilized material from this reviewer's *Black, White, and Chrome*, which contains a lengthy chapter on the American airlift of fuel into Zambia to keep the copper mines operating.<sup>4</sup> These are very minor flaws which hardly diminish the overall power of Irwin's outstanding book.

Indeed, Irwin's focus on the role played by Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda in the international debate over apartheid adds a helpful regional dimension to this study. He contends convincingly that a 1964 speech by Kaunda at an NAM conference in Cairo was a turning point in his political career and "position[ed] him to eventually succeed Gamal Abdel Nasser as the secretary general of the Non-Aligned Movement" (106). Later in the book he features Kaunda's 1969 announcement of the "Lusaka Manifesto" and Pretoria's response (160-162). While Irwin displays a remarkable grasp of South African history, his expedition across the Zambezi would have been enhanced by incorporating insights by some recent studies of Zambia politics and diplomacy, most notably the groundbreaking work by Giacomo Macola and Miles Larmer.<sup>5</sup>

In Brenda Gayle Plummer's new book *In Search of Power*, which is in other respects a stunning tour-de-force, she unconvincingly questions the value of international archival research. According to Plummer, many of these overseas endeavors produce only "a patchwork of sketchy foreign documentation" which has very little "relationship to what policy making elites deem crucial."<sup>6</sup> Irwin's determined detective work in compiling *Gordian Knot* refutes Plummer's accusation. Careful research in any collection, including those in African countries, can provide the nuts and bolts to erect a powerful argument. Irwin makes superior use of the materials in numerous foreign facilities, most importantly the National Archives of South Africa and the Archives of the South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SAMFA), both located in Pretoria.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Zeiler, *Dean Rusk: Defending the American Mission Abroad* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2000), 90-93.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew DeRoche, *Black, White, and Chrome: The United States and Zimbabwe, 1953-1998* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001), 123-130.

<sup>5</sup> For two essential studies of the nuances of Zambian politics see Giacomo Macola, *Liberal Nationalism in Central Africa: A Biography of Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Miles Larmer, *Rethinking African Politics: A History of Opposition in Zambia* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011). For a concise discussion of Zambian diplomacy including responses to the threat from Pretoria, see Andrew DeRoche, "'You Can't Fight Guns with Knives': National Security and Zambian Responses to UDI, 1965-1973" in Jan-Bart Gewald, Marja Hinfelaar, and Giacomo Macola, editors, *One Zambia, Many Histories: Towards a History of Post-Colonial Zambia* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 77-97.

<sup>6</sup> Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956-1974* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 13. My lengthier assessment of Plummer's work will be appearing as a book review in an upcoming issue of the *Journal of American History*.



*Gordian Knot* is full of excellent examples, but for the purposes of this brief review one will suffice. Utilizing information garnered in SAMFA, Irwin relates the story of South Africa's ambassador to the U.S., Harold Taswell, relaxing on the exclusive sands of Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, in July 1967 as race riots erupted in New Jersey and Michigan. He commented wryly to his colleagues that these events would prove useful fodder during his next meeting with U.S. diplomats, who had mercilessly blasted Pretoria after the Sharpeville violence in 1960. "I'd like to have it on record for a few little informal digs when I meet certain gentlemen," Taswell remarked (152). Two wrongs don't make a right, of course, but it is very revealing to read of the South African ambassador's reasoning as fires of racial discord burned in Detroit and Newark.

Diligent and fruitful international research is only part of what makes this such an impressive book. Irwin's prose is elegant and energetic. His argument is clear and convincing. *Gordian Knot* is global history at its best, and it should be read and discussed around the world for many years to come.

South Africa was not a formal participant at the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia. As relayed in the introduction to Ryan Irwin's fine history, it was actively criticized as a potent symbol of what remained of colonialism on the African continent and, more broadly, the global problem of racial injustice. But there was a South African presence at the meeting. Moses Kotane, Secretary General of the South African Communist Party, attended the conference with Ismail Ahmed Cachalia, a leader of the South African Indian Congress, to promote the anti-apartheid struggle to an audience friendly to its interests. Their visit was part of a diplomatic trip that lasted nearly a year, from February to December 1955. After a brief stay in London, their first stop was Cairo, involving a meeting with President Gamal Abdel Nasser, followed by a stop in Delhi and a meeting with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. These two leaders in turn introduced Kotane and Cachalia to other statesmen and diplomats at Bandung, undoubtedly encouraging the citation of apartheid South Africa in different speeches as well as its inclusion in the final communiqué. Though Kotane and Cachalia continued their diplomatic mission— with Cachalia returning to India and Kotane moving on to Warsaw, Prague, and eventually Peking—Bandung proved to be a highlight of their diplomatic efforts that year.<sup>1</sup>

I raise this episode not only to add an unmentioned dimension to the opening scene of Irwin's narrative, but to introduce another thread—and entanglement—to the history he has outlined. *Gordian Knot* is a study of South African foreign policy and foreign policy toward South Africa situated primarily during the principal era of African decolonization, a period from 1958 when Ghana (previously the British Gold Coast) became independent to 1964 when Malawi and Zambia (formerly Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia) achieved autonomy, following the dissolution of Britain's Central African Federation (CAF). During the brief sixyear period in between, Nigeria, Kenya, and Algeria became sovereign countries, along with a slew of French territories in 1960, the so-called "Year of Africa." But problems remained. Southern Rhodesia (contemporary Zimbabwe), also part of the CAF, went rogue through its Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965—a move that reinforced white minority rule and resulted in a long guerrilla struggle until 1980. Portuguese Africa persisted until the mid-1970s. And apartheid South Africa lasted until the early 1990s, with the election of President Nelson Mandela in 1994 consigning that era to the past. Irwin does not spell out his metaphorical use of the Gordian knot—a legend that commonly refers to a difficult problem—but its meaning is clear.<sup>2</sup> Against this backdrop of continental change, apartheid South Africa posed a distinct challenge to the postwar international community through its policies of statutory racism that flagrantly

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Bunting, *Moses Kotane, South African Revolutionary: A Political Biography* (London: Inkululeko Publications, 1975), chapter 12.

<sup>2</sup> Irwin does quote the source of his usage on p. 139.

oppressed a black majority to serve the political and economic interests of a ruling white minority.<sup>3</sup>

The great strength, however, of Irwin's book is that it highlights other forms of entanglement. We already know that apartheid presented a moral and political challenge internal and external to South Africa that lasted far longer than it should have. What still require scholarly attention are the multiple factors that rendered it so. From an institutional perspective, the story that *Gordian Knot* weaves together stresses the role of the United Nations and especially the International Court of Justice (ICJ), along with more familiar players like the governments of Great Britain, the United States, and South Africa. From the standpoint of agency, Irwin further emphasizes the initiative of individuals, such as President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and G. Mennen Williams (U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations), in addition to activist organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-African Congress in South Africa. From an ideological stance, Irwin traces the interplay between African nationalism, pan-Africanism, liberal internationalism, and the rationales of apartheid itself. And finally, from an academic angle, *Gordian Knot* invites audiences from African studies, diplomatic history, international history, and American history, among other fields, into conversation. In short, Irwin presents the anti-apartheid struggle as neither reducible to South Africa nor to Africa more generally, but as a movement that took shape through a range of international forums and actions. Irwin's tacit argument is that it cannot simply reside within the genre of liberation movements and their histories—as important as that genre has been to the establishment of African history as a discipline.

It is this last point that I wish to hold on to. A prevailing tendency for addressing the anti-apartheid struggle has been through the lens of social movements, their members, and their leaders. This trend emerged from the practice of social history—itsself a reflection of the politics of the 1950s and 1960s—that was quickly embraced by historians of Africa based in North America and Europe, as well as on the African continent. It remains the defining paradigm for writing African history to this day.<sup>4</sup> This basic fact underscores why Irwin's history is so useful—and why I fear it will be ignored by the audience that needs it most. Beyond pointing to the complex interaction of states, organizations, and people that defined the apartheid debate at the international level during the 1960s, *Gordian Knot* demonstrates that histories of social movements and international diplomacy need not occupy different books. Indeed, it is with admirable subtlety that Irwin describes how the grassroots interests of parties like the ANC reached an international audience, how activists-turned-statesmen like Kwame Nkrumah shifted anti-colonial momentum into diplomatic policy, and how international bodies like the ICJ—whose 1966 decision to

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to stress that while South Africa (established in 1910) has a long history of racial discrimination, the apartheid period itself lasted from 1948 to 1994. For one overview that compares the apartheid and segregation (1910-1948) periods, see William Beinart and Saul Dubow, eds., *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> For a critical overview, see Frederick Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *American Historical Review*, 99:5 (1994): 1516-45.

uphold South Africa's control over Namibia (then South West Africa) proved to be a critical juncture for respecting South African sovereignty—could have immediate and palpable effects on the ground. Irwin's narrative points to the value of stepping beyond the social history paradigm in order to understand the broader contexts of power in which social movements emerged, struggled, and persisted, if not under conditions of their choosing. It is a much needed lesson for the field of African history which continues to toil, consciously or not, in the shadow of figures such as E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Terence Ranger.<sup>5</sup>

This observation is not to say that a moment of stark decision has been reached. Rather, a more capacious conceptualization of "African history" is needed to reconsider how African leaders and activists fundamentally shaped communities and institutions beyond the geographic outlines of the continent itself. While a great deal of scholarship has been committed to early modern patterns of global diasporic connection, less attention has been granted to socio-political connections during the modern period and even less to the postcolonial period.<sup>6</sup> This argument returns to my opening anecdote. The example of Kotane and Cachalia demonstrates once more how it is unnecessary to separate diplomatic history from social history. Indeed, the two can vitally shape one another.<sup>7</sup> Political protest and struggle within South Africa, and southern Africa more generally, ultimately ended apartheid.<sup>8</sup> But, as Irwin concludes, diplomacy by the UN African Group and figures like Williams played crucial roles in elevating the anti-apartheid cause internationally, despite counter-offensive efforts by the apartheid government. *Gordian Knot* ultimately provides a new paradigm for thinking through this period by forcefully reminding us that apartheid did not simply represent a political dilemma local to South Africa. It reflected an enduring global problem of racial prejudice that, in turn, demanded a global response.

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<sup>5</sup> These historians are, of course, deserving of esteem for their accomplishments. Terence Ranger helped establish the field of African history through such works as *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-97: A Study in African Resistance* (London: Heinemann, 1967).

<sup>6</sup> I refer here to the immense historiography on the African slave trades. For recent work that has examined modern and postcolonial connections, see, for example, Kevin Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); and Robert Trent Vinson, *The Americans are Coming!: Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> So-called "frontline states" like Botswana, Zambia, Tanzania, Angola, and Mozambique provided crucial refuge and support for anti-apartheid activists. For recent work on the regional nature of the struggle, see Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Rethinking Cold War History in Southern Africa*. Special issue of *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 37 (2011): 1-144.

In 1948, the Afrikaner-dominated National Party (NP) came to power in South Africa and swiftly moved to institute a racially based form of social organisation under which political participation, social mobility, educational opportunities, and much more besides was determined by ethnic designation. Amid many other pressing concerns on the international agenda and with the concept of decolonisation still very much inchoate, this raised only a few eyebrows. In time, however, opposition to apartheid would become one of the great international liberal causes of the post-war era. But how did this transition begin to occur? Why did perceptions of apartheid change so dramatically, unleashing a discourse of vituperative condemnation that marked proceedings at the United Nations, newspaper columns, and international discourse for decades? Ryan Irwin's *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* provides an intriguing answer, locating the growth of anti-apartheid sentiment in the emergence of post-colonial states in the early 1960s and the recalibration of the international order this wrought. Grounded in extensive research in American, South African, United Nations and European documents, the result is an original and eminently readable work of uncommon scope and conceptual breadth.

Irwin explores how the global debate over apartheid became a "lodestar" (5) for the formation of a post-colonial world order in which African countries, operating particularly through the United Nations, held real influence in setting the international agenda. "Just as anticommunism animated Washington's Cold War and anticapitalism oriented Moscow's stance abroad," he contends, "the fight against apartheid gave form to the political project known as the Third World" (5). Irwin explores this process from a genuinely global perspective; the United States plays a key role in his narrative, but the analysis could hardly be described as Washington-centric. Indeed even well-read scholars may find themselves reaching for an atlas or (perish the thought) Wikipedia, such is the array of concepts, personalities, and events marshalled in support of the argument. As for the argument itself, it can perhaps be described as 'messy,' in the best sense of the word. The role of norms in constructing international orders; the changing nature of sources of political legitimacy in the post-colonial world; the United States' struggle with conducting diplomacy on apartheid given the unresolved iniquities of its own racial past; the difficulties encountered by Washington in dealing with small and ostensibly insignificant African states; the sudden emergence of race as a major determinant of international relations; the interactions of North and South as well as East and West: all these and more feature as prominent themes. In *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era*, a book whose conceptualisation of international history has clearly influenced that of *Gordian Knot*, Matthew Connelly observed that, "in terms of both geographical areas and areas of inquiry, ranging too far afield can result in a work without real insight into any particular one. Alternatively, in using research from several states and non-state organisations to reconstruct the web of relations between them, one

can lose control of the material and become lost in the complexity”.<sup>1</sup> These are indeed major pitfalls of the internationalist approach, but Irwin avoids them. Instead, he provides real insight into a wide range of questions bearing on the nature of the international community in the 1960s; *Gordian Knot* will prove useful to historians specialising in an unusually wide range of sub-disciplines.

*Gordian Knot* is best understood as being divided into four parts. In the first, Irwin depicts and grounds the *status quo ante* for his thesis: the emergence onto the world stage of post-colonial African states, priorities, and leaders in 1960. In post-war South Africa, the staunch anti-communism of the NP governments and the prominence of the Cold War as the dominant paradigm of international relations provided Pretoria with Western protection and political legitimacy. However, as Irwin illustrates in his first two chapters, black African leaders, many of them soon to be in positions of power in post-colonial states, were rounding on apartheid as a counterpoint to their vision of independence and pan-Africanism. Importantly, this was a continent-wide phenomenon; it was not only the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress in South Africa but African leaders generally who focused on apartheid as the political heir of colonialism and the antithesis to their vision of the future. Irwin highlights how rapidly the new African states made their presence known on the global stage, whether it was Ethiopia and Liberia bringing legal action in the International Court of Justice against Pretoria’s control of South-West Africa (SWA), the formation of the African Group at the UN, or the intervention to help expel South Africa from the Commonwealth. All of these events occurred in rapid succession over 1960-1; not for the last time in the book, Irwin illuminates how Africa’s anti-apartheid press caught many leaders who figured themselves much closer to the centres of global power by surprise. “South Africa is one of the senior members of the Commonwealth”, a plainly bemused and irritated South African Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd said upon his country’s expulsion, “No self-respecting member of any voluntary organisation could ... be expected to retain membership in what is now becoming a pressure group” (54).

It was not only the South Africans who found themselves wrong footed by this brave new world of postcolonial international politics. In the second part of his thesis, Irwin turns to Washington, using the figure of Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, G. Mennen ‘Soapy’ Williams, as a vehicle for his exploration of the liberal American response to the African challenge. The result of Williams’ consultations with both African and civil rights leaders in the early years of the Kennedy administration was an unequivocal policy recommendation: America had “a choice between good relations with South Africa and the stability and friendship of the rest of Africa as well as doing the right thing” (80). The Administration disagreed. Foreign policy remained dominated by Cold War-based national security requirements which were Eurocentric in both their conceptual architecture and geographical focus. Even at the UN, where the post-colonial African states were making their presence felt, the Administration proved remarkably tone-deaf when it came to understanding their anti-racist rhetoric, its intellectual foundations, and political

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution : Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. ix.

trajectory. “For the better part of two years, Williams’ pronouncements fell on deaf ears,” Irwin argues. “[T]he president and his core advisors simply did not see race questions in moral terms” (85). The explosion of the civil rights movement in 1963 changed all that. As the Kennedy Administration acknowledged the political urgency of providing for civil rights at home, it equally realised that a recalibration of its foreign policy on racial issues would assist and bolster its domestic efforts. And in its early years, the Johnson Administration continued and furthered the anti-apartheid tilt that Kennedy began.

The third part of *Gordian Knot* deals with the landmark International Court of Justice case brought by Ethiopia and Liberia against South Africa over the issue of its control of SWA, which Irwin uses as a point of intersection for the different elements of his narrative – South African, black African, and American. In the aftermath of the First World War, the League of Nations had granted South Africa a mandate over the former German colony. After the Second World War, however, Pretoria began to treat the territory as a *de facto* part of South Africa, arguing that the demise of the League had terminated the mandate but not its responsibility to govern the territory as it best saw fit. This naturally included the imposition of apartheid in the form of both day to day discrimination (‘petty’ apartheid) and of the creation of ethnically based entities or homelands (separate development). As Irwin points out, the court case was largely political, an overt attempt to establish apartheid’s moral and legal repugnance in international law. A ruling in favour of the Africans would not only provide a platform for action at the UN, but would circumvent a Security Council unwilling to impose formal measures against Pretoria. However, the ICJ’s 8-7 ruling that the African nations had no legal standing to secure a judgment on the issue was a turning point in the struggle between apartheid and its critics, delivering a major blow to the Africans and a commensurate fillip to apartheid’s architects in Pretoria.

This sets the foundation for the final part of the thesis, in which Irwin illuminates how Africa’s anti-apartheid campaign ran out of steam in the latter half of the 1960s. In the international arena, the momentum of the African Group’s efforts to bring UN sanctions against South Africa stalled markedly. The ICJ case was not solely to blame. The fall of several of the more influential post-colonial African leaders, the replacement of the euphoria of post-colonialism by the harsh realities of underdevelopment and poverty, and bitter conflicts within the African Group over the leadership of the anti-apartheid movement and the best mechanisms for confronting Pretoria were all important. Simultaneously, the Johnson Administration was re-evaluating its attitude towards South Africa in the context of its approach towards the Third World more generally. Many of the arguments that would underpin the infamous Nixon policy on apartheid began to emerge: sanctions would be ineffective and costly, and neither Congress nor Washington’s European allies had much enthusiasm for them; apartheid could best be changed through engagement rather than alienation; the liberation movements were too weak to provoke a major racial conflict in the region. Washington began to feel that “The United Nations was more of a distraction to US interests than a reflection of American values in the world – and it was time for a more “realistic” stance abroad”(148). The result was a tenacious and unexpected comeback by the South African regime, one characterised by political stability, economic growth, and renewed self-confidence. By the end of the decade, Pretoria was in rude health and the prospect of an end to apartheid looked far-fetched.

Quite apart from what it brings to the historiography, *Gordian Knot* provides methodological food for thought on two fronts. First, as Irwin constructs his argument about global international developments, moving seamlessly from Pretoria to Washington to London to Accra, he displays an uncommon ability to clarify the relationship between the construction and redefinition of norms and their influence on global politics. In setting out his argument, he writes: “Although certain terminologies – freedom, justice, equality – persisted over long periods of time, the reference points that oriented these concepts changed as the fortunes of these groups ebbed and flowed on the international stage” (9). It is in its exploration of how this process occurred on a global scale in relation to apartheid specifically that *Gordian Knot* is at its most impressive. Second, Irwin illuminates post-colonial politics through an empirical and top-down approach familiar to Cold War and international history scholars, a significant move when post-colonial history remains dominated by social, cultural, bottom-up, and linguistic approaches. This is to be applauded; the chronic neglect of an understanding of post-colonial African states as sophisticated political actors in their own right is a real lacuna in the field. One might even say that the denial of specifically political African history ironically and tragically only reinforces the much-derided perception that Africa’s history is little more than ‘unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant parts of the globe,’ in historian Hugh Trevor-Roper’s infamous phrase. *Gordian Knot* provides a powerful argument that this is not the case.

In such a far-reaching argument spread across just 188 pages, it is inevitable that some issues remain unresolved or leave the reader wanting more. I found myself looking wistfully at the timeline of this book. Irwin makes a persuasive case for the rise of a new international order into the late 1960s, but I could not help asking questions about how this order evolved into the next decade. In Africa more than anywhere else, the early 1970s saw the fragmentation of Third World solidarity in favour of a more Cold War oriented pattern of international relations. By the emergency Organisation of African Unity meeting in Addis Ababa in January 1976, the member states were split 22-22 on a vote that amounted to recognising the communist People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) as the government of Angola or supporting the South African-backed moderate coalition. So much for anti-apartheid African unity. Indeed, as Irwin begins to explore in the final chapter, South Africa enjoyed considerable success in the late 1960s in developing bilateral relationships with a number of anti-communist black (and often francophone) African states; this only accelerated in the subsequent years with prime ministerial visits to Liberia and the Ivory Coast. What impact did this have on the African Group’s efforts to promote UN sanctions and delegitimise apartheid? All books have to end somewhere, but there is another project that should explain what would seem to be the other half of the chiasmus: how Pretoria’s success in the early 1970s in replacing anti-apartheid with anti-communism as the determining factor of its relations with black Africa itself yielded in 1976-7 to the more globalised anti-apartheid movement that coalesced around events like the Soweto riots and symbols like the murder of Black Consciousness activist Steve Biko.

More generally, while agreeing with Irwin’s contention that “the emerging leaders of Africa and Asia had little enthusiasm for the turgid East-West binary that pitted Moscow against



Washington and divided the world into warring ideological camps” (5), I remain to be convinced that these emerging leaders – for all their lack of enthusiasm - were in fact able to effectively displace the Cold War paradigm with their decolonisation imperatives as readily as *Gordian Knot* suggests. Instead, I would argue that through the 1960s the two co-existed uneasily in a relationship that manifested itself in different ways in different parts of Africa (and further afield). . In short, there is room in Irwin’s thesis for more of a focus on events within a Cold War framework while not detracting from the decolonisation-centric narrative. This naturally does not detract from what will doubtless be considered a valuable and original study of enduring quality.

Author's Response by Ryan M. Irwin, University at Albany-SUNY

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I'd like to thank Tim Borstelmann, Jeff Byrne, Andy DeRoche, Chris Lee, and Jamie Miller for their generous and thoughtful comments. Each reviewer has engaged *Gordian Knot* in a different way and I hope the diversity of their views will be taken as evidence of the book's complexity. I'm deeply honored by their praise and gratified that they grasp what I'm trying to do in *Gordian Knot*, which is to provide a history of the apartheid debate that explores African decolonization's wider impact on the international system. As these reviews suggest, the book weaves together two stories, the first of which is related to South Africa's fate in the mid-twentieth century and the second of which is tied to the decline of American soft power in the Cold War. The resulting narrative explores the unmaking of an international system that was anchored by American power and organized by a deeply paradoxical form of postcolonial sovereignty.

In part, *Gordian Knot* is designed to challenge the triumphalist narrative of the anti-apartheid movement. South Africa's 'long walk to freedom,' as Nelson Mandela termed it, has been treated often as a whiggish morality play, with historians writing the story backwards from 1994, searching for the answer to Borstelmann's question, "Why did apartheid last so long?" Finding someone to blame is one way to prevent the recrudescence of the apartheid tragedy.<sup>1</sup> However, as Miller observes, *Gordian Knot* begins in a different place—"How did apartheid become so controversial?"—and explores the way several protagonists interpreted and responded to the opportunities and pitfalls of the 'long' 1960s. The book tries to relate this story as truthfully and carefully as possible, which, as Borstelmann suggests, may strike some readers as "bloodless." He rightly underscores the fact that *Gordian Knot* is not about heroes, villains, landowners, or miners; it is about politicized elites who pursued legitimacy in a rapidly changing international system. Lee's reflections on this approach are particularly insightful, and I agree with him that exploring how (and where) people critiqued, defined, and judged 'separate development' enriches the way we see South Africa's past and the wider dilemma of racial prejudice.

The urgency of this approach stems from apartheid's relationship to the other nation-making projects of the twentieth century. Apartheid's architects were not irrational; they were part of a fast-moving conversation about the nature of statehood and nationhood, and their eventual isolation provides a microcosm to think about the impact of African decolonization. The stakes here are self-evident—especially as contemporary policymakers reassess the nation-state's relationship to globalization<sup>2</sup>—and beneath *Gordian Knot's* exposition of the apartheid debate is a more complex narrative about sovereignty in the wake of African decolonization. Byrne and Miller provide particularly

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<sup>1</sup> For further reflections on the historiography, see Ryan M. Irwin, "Mapping Race: Historicizing the History of the Color-Line," *History Compass* 8:9 (September 2010), 984-999.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent variation on this question, see Eric Schnurer, "Who Even Needs the Nation-State in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?" *The Atlantic*, accessed on 2 June 2013.

thoughtful ruminations on this theme, and wrestle intelligently with the book's treatment of activism and order during the mid-twentieth century. The United Nations system was changed, I argue, not by apartheid but by the nation-state's triumph in the Black Atlantic, which forced a cross-section of elites to confront self-determination's conceptual relationship to state capacity, racial equality, and institutional interdependence. My narrative is about this trajectory-setting moment, and it provides, I hope, an original and nuanced explanation of how several distinct internationalisms came together during the mid-twentieth century.

*Gordian Knot* is also about polycentrism in the Cold War. Byrne and Miller astutely note the book's indebtedness to Matt Connelly's *A Diplomatic Revolution*,<sup>3</sup> and *Gordian Knot* indeed elaborates a style of diplomatic history that balances government and non-government perspectives and utilizes archival sources from several different protagonists. As I noted in *Passport's* roundtable of *Gordian Knot*, the book is designed to explore what American hegemony felt like to small actors with big expectations.<sup>4</sup> Viewing the Cold War in this manner, first, confirms Byrne's assessment about the asymmetrical nature of the superpower contest, and, second, suggests the utility of looking closely at the United Nations. *Gordian Knot* pushes hard against those who argue that Washington's relationship to the UN was simply a matter of partisan politics. Such a claim not only distorts the way the organization framed options in the early Cold War, but also ignores contemporary (bipartisan) writing about the UN's importance to international life.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, seeing the superpower contest as a polycentric affair allows historians to avoid a misguided search for the 'origins' of the post-Cold War world, and confirms Miller's assessment that

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Ryan M. Irwin, "A Different Lens," *Passport: The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Review* 44:1 (April 2013), 30-32.

<sup>5</sup> For a sampling of contemporary literature, see Adda Bozeman, *The Future of Law in a Multicultural World* (Princeton, 1971); Harlan Cleveland, *The Third Try at World Order* (New York, 1977); Clifford Geertz, ed., *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa* (London, 1963); David Gordon, *Self-Determination and History in the Third World* (Princeton, 1971); Thomas Hovet, *Bloc Politics in the United Nations* (Cambridge, MA, 1960); *Ibid.*, *Africa in the United Nations* (Chicago, 1963); G. H. Jansen, *Afro-Asia and Non-Alignment* (London, 1966); Peter Lyon, *Neutralism* (Leicester, 1963); David Kay, *The New Nations in the United Nations, 1960-1967* (New York, 1970); David Kimche, *The Afro-Asian Movement: Ideology and Foreign Policy of the Third World* (Tel Aviv, 1973); Leo Kuper, ed., *Race, Science and Society* (New York, 1975); Laurence Martin, ed., *Neutralism and Nonalignment: The New States of the World* (New York, 1962); Robert Strausz-Hupe and Harry Hazard, ed., *The Idea of Colonialism* (New York, 1958); Francis Wilcox and H. Field Haviland, Jr., eds., *The United States and the United Nations* (Baltimore, 1961); Francis Wilcox and Carl Marcy, *Proposals for Changes in the United Nations* (Washington, DC, 1955); Peter Willetts, *The Non-Aligned Movement: The Origins of a Third World Alliance* (New York, 1978). For a sampling of recent scholarship, see David Bosco, *Five to Rule Them All: The UN Security Council and the Making of the Modern World* (New York, 2009); Ilya Gaiduk, *Divided Together: The United States and the Soviet Union at the United Nations, 1945-1965* (Stanford, 2012); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan* (Princeton, 2011); Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York, 2012); and Thomas Zeiler, *Free Trade, Free World: The Advent of GATT* (Chapel Hill, 1999).

postcolonial claim-making unfolded in different ways across and beyond Africa. The Third World's distaste for the East-West binary in no way 'displaced' the Cold War, as Miller rightly suggests. *Gordian Knot* calls instead for a thoughtful examination of political space during the twentieth century.

The reviewers accept the book's primary thesis—a relief for any author—while offering several important critiques. First, my sincere apologies to DeRoche (and Tom Zeiler) for not citing their excellent books; both have influenced my thinking and deserve wide recognition, and I look forward to reading Giacomo Macola's and Miles Larmer's books, on DeRoche's recommendation, soon. Second, while I appreciate Byrne's insights, I challenge the assertion that *Gordian Knot* is lopsided. The sections are balanced almost evenly, with about sixty pages on African diplomacy, fifty pages on American policymaking, and another fifty pages on the National Party, plus the introduction, conclusion, and several other hybrid sections. Even after *Gordian Knot's* midpoint, the story maintains its triangular orientation. Chapter 5, for instance, is devoted almost entirely to African diplomacy at the United Nations—not bilateral relations between Washington and Pretoria, as Byrne suggests—and nearly a third of chapter 6 is about the African National Congress. That said, third, I see the merit in Byrne's suggestion that the book could be more 'old-fashioned.' *Gordian Knot* lingers on how Washington came to consider punitive action against Pretoria. This approach differs from that of Thomas Noer's excellent *Cold War and Black Liberation*,<sup>6</sup> which focuses on high strategy and geopolitics, by consciously eschewing the hierarchy Byrne calls for in favor of a messier examination of bureaucratic process. Exploring the headwinds and breakthroughs that faced antiapartheid policymakers is less straightforward, but it arguably deepens our appreciation of how big ideas interacted with personal conviction and institutional restraints.

Should *Gordian Knot* have been longer? This question, raised in different ways by Byrne and Miller, is fair. On the one hand, I purposefully tried to make the book as lean as possible. Byrne is right that the narrative refrains from excessive repetition and moves at a fairly steady pace through its material, which means that some relevant background information is relegated to the footnotes. I think that there is a place for tightly-written, argumentative monographs, and *Gordian Knot* is deliberately located within that genre. On the other hand, as Miller hints, there is a subtle tension between the book's conclusion, which summarizes the anti-apartheid movement *after* the 1960s, and my overall emphasis on the period surrounding African decolonization. The rationale behind this gap is fairly obvious—tied, of course, to the dramas of the early 1990s—but Miller is absolutely correct that we need archival histories of the 1970s and 1980s. I eagerly await his forthcoming project on this period and hope that someday soon it will be possible to write a rich synthesis of South African international history in the twentieth century.

Thank you again to Borstelmann, Byrne, DeRoche, Lee, and Miller for these thoughtful reflections on *Gordian Knot*. Like Lee, I hope *Gordian Knot* finds an audience among a

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation: The United States and White Rule in Africa, 1948-1968* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985).

cross-section of scholars with interests in foreign relations, decolonization, international institutions, and apartheid South Africa. The book is designed to speak to people with an interest in the past of our present, and it seeks to provide a useful template to rethink a critical juncture in global history.

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