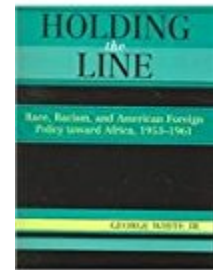


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Bleached Bones as White Skeletons in the Closet

Of the many manifestations of racism in the United States, one that is particularly insidious, because it is difficult to identify as such, is the idea that Whiteness signifies normality and that non-Whites are a deviation from the norm. If in given situations and accounts of events the racial backgrounds of the persons concerned are not stated, they are to be presumed White. According to the theory of Whiteness underlying such an assumption, all manifestations of “American-ness,” unless they are given a specific ethnic/racial designation, partake of that one unstated designation. The same assumption regarding Whiteness is also applied to “European-ness,” particularly in regard to the peoples and civilizations of western and northern Europe. With this conception of Whiteness in mind, George W. White, a Harvard Law School graduate turned historian, has undertaken an analysis of Eisenhower-era (1953-1961) American foreign policy towards the emerging states of Black Africa. The backdrop for this analysis is, on one hand, the exigencies of American leadership of the West in the Cold War, and on the other, the growing struggle at home for African American integration and civil rights.

Professor White begins his study by laying out a typology of presumed racism towards Blacks at all levels of the Eisenhower administration. He gives this typology historical roots by evoking the painful history of American relations with Haiti. He then links it to the domestic situation of the United States through an analysis of the reaction of the Eisenhower administration to the *Brown* decision of May 1954. Moving on, the author offers

four African case studies to illustrate the workings of his Whiteness typology. These focus on U.S. relations with Ethiopia during the Eisenhower administration; Ghana, as it emerged from British rule in 1957; South Africa, particularly after the March 1960 Sharpeville Massacre led to a tightening of apartheid; and Congo-Kinshasa, as it went into crisis following its independence from Belgium at the end of June 1960. It seems that in each situation American policymakers, swayed by questions of race, made wrong decisions.

Altogether, Professor White’s verdict is harsh. Because “White [American] elites could not imagine a world in which Blacks competently governed their own affairs” (p. 136), the United States pursued policies intended to encourage and enable the former colonial powers to retain some control over their former colonies so as to guarantee, on one hand, their continued allegiance to the so-called Free World, and on the other hand, continued access to the natural resources of the new nations. Therefore, American policy “undermined the economic viability of African nations” and “was consistently antidemocratic” (p. 135) in that it sought out potential anticommunist strongmen to rule these nations and, in general, manipulated “Cold War Decolonization” such that the “Free World [might] ... continue to demand non-White obedience to a world order primarily dictated by race” (p. 145).

Central to Professor White’s thesis is the idea of the transformation of Whiteness from a paradigm of open

oppression of non-Whites to a more seemingly benign (but just as harmful) form of hidden control. This transformation, according to him, has occurred and manifests itself in five ways: as “White innocence” reflected in contemporary commitments voiced by the White establishment in favor of democracy, civil rights for all, and claimed generosity that is expected to cancel out the very long history of White-imposed racial oppression; “White entitlement,” meaning that because of the self-proclaimed good qualities of White people they are entitled to a “disproportionate share of power, resources, and esteem”; “Black erasure,” which refers to the unwillingness of Whites to recognize the accomplishments of Black people and the legitimacy of their aspirations; “Black self-abnegation,” meaning that Blacks must willingly agree with White assumptions of Black erasure; and “Black insatiability,” referring to the belief that Black expectations are unreasonable even when they are the quintessence of reasonableness.

Bearing in mind these five manifestations of Whiteness and the aggression against Black people that they imply, Professor White offers the reader, as a trial run, two analyses of how they have operated in the United States and abroad. The first of these refers to the generally troubled American relationship with Haiti going back to the late eighteenth-century slave rebellion that brought that nation into existence. In particular, Professor White stresses the transformation of Haiti into an informal American protectorate following its occupation in 1915 by units of the United States Marine Corps. The second example refers to the go-slow responses of the Eisenhower administration to the condemnation of public school segregation resulting from the May 1954 outcome of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case. Regarding school desegregation, the fact that the plaintiffs in the five cases that led to the *Brown* decision received support early on through a favorable amicus brief prepared by the Truman Justice Department could be construed as illustrating the first manifestation of Whiteness, White innocence. Whereas the fact that the Eisenhower Justice Department called for a gradualist approach to the application of the May 1954 decision illustrates support for White entitlement in that the demands for redress of the plaintiffs and the potential inconvenience to the defendants are treated as moral equivalents. The fact that the Court made no mention of the violently racist origins of segregation in the United States, that it did not demand immediate compliance with its May 1954 decision, and that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) legal

team headed by Thurgood Marshall ultimately accepted the idea of gradualism, illustrate the operation of Black erasure and Black self-abnegation. And that many Black leaders had hoped for and wished to press on for the immediate desegregation of schools following May 1954 appears as an example of Black insatiability.

The application of these manifestations of Whiteness by the Eisenhower administration to the international arena of the mid- to late 1950s enabled the United States government to posit the Cold War “as the international racial sanctuary,” with “global Communism as an evil force bent on enslaving the world,” and the United States and the colonial powers “as the font of liberty, opportunity, and individual freedom,” a “discourse [that] erased the history and legacy of Europe as the scourge of the globe” (p. 22).

The approach embodied in this book and the method of analysis are very clever if not ingenious and do seem to yield novel conclusions as to the racist nature of White American attitudes towards Black Africans. However, some important caveats loom. To begin with, Professor White’s view of Whiteness should more correctly be labeled WASP-ness, for the attitudes and behaviors underlying his perceptions of Whiteness particularly reflect the White, Protestant upper middle-class attitudes of the American leadership of the 1950s. Also, how can one be certain that what appear to be American doubts as to the political orientation and competence of African leaders, like Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba, or an unwillingness to provide state-of-the-art armaments to the Ethiopian army, or to invest as heavily in the Volta River Project in Ghana as the respective governments wished is a manifestation of Black insatiability (and racism) as the author charges? Might not the less than enthusiastic responses of the Eisenhower administration to such African wishes be the mundane reflection of how best to prioritize American global commitments given the reality (even then) of limited resources and the fact that Africa was peripheral to the main concerns of American foreign policy? And one must certainly not forget the extreme anticommunism of the American people and leadership during a period when the most serious threat to American security was perceived as the Soviet Union, the only other thermonuclear power. Yet the roots of this anticommunism were long, going back to the Palmer Raids of 1919. While one can legitimately argue that the United States did support the marginalization of Nkrumah and the elimination of Lumumba because, as Black African leaders, they were too independent-minded, not to mention leftist (by American standards),

American opposition to these leaders hinged more on the fear that they were pro-communist than on the fact of their Blackness. One should note that the Eisenhower administration went to some pains to discredit or destroy non-Black leaders perceived as leftist in other parts of the world: Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran and Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in Guatemala, for instance. Of course, these leaders were not White in the WASP sense (and clearly Professor White's conception of Whiteness is in fact WASP-ness), but they were not Black Africans either. By chance, the Eisenhower administration was confronted with massive decolonization in Africa. But in a sense, this decolonization was a continuation, on another continent, of the decolonization in Asia that the Truman administration had faced. Here too the American government, while sympathetic to the idea of decolonization, worried that the independence movements might be captured by communists. We note, for instance, that the American government only fully committed itself to Indonesian independence after Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta appeared to be repudiating their communist links. At that point, just as would be the case with the Eisenhower administration and certain colonies in Africa, the Truman administration attempted, in the guise of peace-making, to push Indonesia into retaining close links with its former metropole, the Netherlands. In the case of Indochina, where, it is true, the United States had less local influence than in Indonesia, Ho Chi Minh refused to repudiate his communist ties, thus stimulating the American authorities to encourage the French to destroy him and his communist movement and eventually to open a second path to independence. In both cases, American policy attempted to promote close relations between the former colonies and the former metropolises. Was the Eisenhower approach to decolonization in Africa really much different from the Truman approach to decolonization in Asia?

Professor White's analysis comes closest to hitting the mark in the case of South Africa. His analogies stand up because both countries were founded by European settlers who imposed themselves on conquered native peoples and eventually formed independent governments. Although Whites in South Africa, unlike in the United States, were a minority, the political class in South Africa during the Eisenhower era was totally White and mostly Protestant. Both societies went through a period of legalized enslavement of non-Whites. Legal segregation followed, and apartheid became an extreme form of Jim Crow. In short, the White elites of both countries could identify with each other. Very importantly,

however, "South Africa became the United States' fourth-largest foreign market" (p. 95), a fact which suggests that money linked to anticommunism, rather than race per se, pushed American policymakers into muting their critique of apartheid. Nevertheless, members of the Eisenhower administration, like Julius Holmes, were indeed critical of apartheid (White innocence) while calling for its gradual elimination in ways that would protect the interests of the White South African population (White entitlement) as well as American (White) access to South African resources, while suspecting the African National Congress (ANC) of communist leanings (Black erasure) (p. 98). One notices, however, that as the communist threat receded and the Cold War wound down, successive American administrations took increasingly hard lines towards the apartheid regime, suggesting that the real American fear all along had been communism. For American policymakers, communism was worse than apartheid, but once the communist threat began to dissipate, the American government was willing to tackle apartheid. What is disappointing about this book is that the author has based so much on so few case studies (Ethiopia, Ghana, South Africa, and Congo-Kinshasa). Conspicuously absent is any analysis of Eisenhower administration reactions to French decolonization. If the Eisenhower era policymakers were concerned about Nkrumah's apparent Pan Africanism and allegedly socialist tendencies, how must they have reacted to the emergence of the labor union leader, Sekou Toure of Guinea, on the African and international scene after his party, the Parti Democratique de la Guinee (PDG), had obtained a "non" vote in de Gaulle's referendum at the end of September 1958? Professor White makes no mention of the matter. Nobody in the Eisenhower administration had anticipated the sudden independence of Guinea; indeed, the administration was slow to extend diplomatic recognition to the new state for fear of offending the French. Nevertheless, John H. Morrow, an African American academic with Republican Party links was sent to Conakry as U.S. Ambassador, and before long, the Eisenhower administration began making efforts to woo Sekou Toure away from his Marxist-"CGTiste" political and intellectual roots, an effort aided by the fortuitous ineptitude of Soviet policymakers and diplomats in their dealings with Guinea.

Although silent with regard to American relations with Guinea and other Francophone African states, Professor White does mention Cameroon but from a negative perspective, referring to the American preference for Ahmadou Ahidjo, the president of the country at

independence, and American support for the French design to end the UN Trusteeship of Cameroon and cede independence without a final UN-supervised general election (pp. 35-36). Professor White seems to assume that Felix Moumie, leader of the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), that had been engaged in a guerilla insurgency against the French authorities and Cameroonian moderates since 1956, might have won such an election. Like so many American liberal academics, White is critical of Ahidjo and American (as well as French) support for him, never mind the fact that once the UPC insurrection (that only affected a small part of the country but caused more fatalities than the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya) had been suppressed, within five years of Cameroonian accession to independence, the country, for the next fifteen years at least, became an island of peace surrounded by degrees of turbulence in every country bordering it.

Likewise, Professor White says nothing about how the Eisenhower administration reacted to the ongoing Algerian War of Independence, the most important liberation struggle occurring in Africa during the period concerned—particularly after 1956 when Algeria became an oil-producer. (Of course, Algeria is not a Black African country even though Algerians, under colonial rule, had to contend with as much *racisme*, if not more, than Africans in other parts of the French Empire.) Certainly the Eisenhower administration worried about the alleged communist and Nasserist leanings of the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN) and, in the case of Algeria too, attempted to encourage a rapprochement between Algerian nationalists and the French government so as to keep the oil and gas resources of Algeria out of commu-

nist hands.

Altogether, what can one say about this book? Certainly Professor White's elaboration of the five manifestations of Whiteness and their use as analytical tools is intriguing, but this typology does not always hit home. It gives its best results when used to explain the domestic racial situation in the United States as efforts to desegregate and to achieve Black civil rights took off. It is less effective when applied to African situations where other issues, that he de-emphasizes or overlooks, come into play. He underestimates the irrational and blinding force of American anticommunism during the Eisenhower era. Yet he suggests as much by mentioning that President Eisenhower, who really did have pronounced racist tendencies, nevertheless had fond memories of Sylvanus Olympio, the first President of independent Togo (p. 20), probably because of this leader's expressed anti-communism. Professor White is also forced to admit, in regard to the racial attitudes of the White male leadership whose members surrounded President Eisenhower, that "[w]ith regard to people of African descent in the United States, there were few direct statements or observations" (p. 18), but he would like the reader to assume that whatever remarks were made were probably negative and racist.

Professor White considers that today the United States "faces its greatest international security threats from people responding to the collapse, or corruption of sovereign authority" (p. 146). He blames this situation of failed states, particularly in Africa, on the American privileging of Whiteness as described in this book. It is an interesting theory but one that should be taken with the proverbial grain of salt.

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