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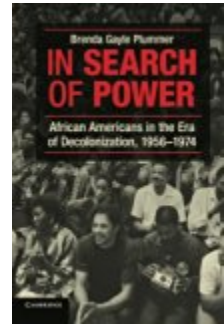
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brenda Gayle Plummer. *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956-1974*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. vii + 372 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-02299-7; \$29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-107-65471-6.

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From Capahosic to the Congo: Brenda Gayle Plummer's *In Search of Power*

Recently, as the United States marked the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, some of that day's most memorable events played out across newspapers, television sets, and social media. Less in evidence was an international context for the day. And while by no means the most important international context, tucked in the middle of her important new book, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956-1974*, Brenda Gayle Plummer points out that more happened in Washington on that hot August day. Even as thousands marched on the National Mall in search of social justice, President John F. Kennedy was quietly approving the sale of C-130 parts to the white minority government in South Africa (p. 127).

What do we make of a president selling military-grade material to an apartheid-riven nation even as his own citizens sought to overcome such segregation and second-class citizenship in what that very president called a moral imperative? Such juxtaposition is only a tiny passage in this wide-ranging book, a brief note in a book brimming with insights and information. Yet it is such observations that reward the careful reader, for Brenda Gayle Plummer, as one has come to expect, provides in this work yet more for us to think about in the intersections of race, decolonization, power, and global relationships.

This "hybrid history" (p. 12) examines how states, elites, and dissidents—from presidents in oval offices to

nationalists on Harlem streets—faced the challenges of the late twentieth century. Plummer does not consider this an African American history monograph, nor a U.S. foreign relations history, but a work that breaks down subfields, and right she is. Power exists on multiple levels, and so does Plummer's work.

In framing "the era of decolonization" Plummer commences in the mid-1950s when, she argues, heads of state such as Dwight D. Eisenhower and Charles De Gaulle sought "to inoculate themselves against the challenges to global order they thought decolonization would bring" (p. 4). Incremental change was acceptable, with the hope for moderate and democratic processes that would mirror the West. Yet by the end of the 1950s, status quo ideas were being deeply challenged in a world rapidly changing, and insurgents sought change on their own terms. Radical energies were on the march. National leaders were being forced to shift domestically, with civil rights, anticolonialist, and human rights activists opening spaces for U.S. race relations to be recast from civil rights being associated with radicalism to civil rights being associated with liberalism.

Internationally, the demands for decolonization put new pressures for change on race relations in America while, of course, creating new global dynamics. One should not read the title and think of this as a continuation or elaboration of Plummer's 1996 work *A Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-*

1960, for in truth Plummer has much more on her mind. Indeed, at times it seems her wide-ranging book reaches toward encompassing the whole of the Atlantic world in the era of decolonization.

This extensiveness is richly rewarding. Plummer's exploration of long-underappreciated opposition to French nuclear testing in the Sahara, for instance, draws out and weaves together the remarkable tapestry of actors and efforts in this international blend of nonviolent direct action, anticolonialism, peace activism, and diasporic cooperation. Even a partial list of the people pulled together to work against the nuclear testing speaks to this transnational effort: William Sutherland, the African American working as secretary to Ghanaian finance minister Komila Gbedemah; renowned pacifist A. J. Muste; Leabua Jonathan, the future president (and strongman) of Lesotho; Michael Scott, the Anglican priest and activist most known for his work in South Africa and South West Africa; and civil rights and peace promoter Bayard Rustin.

Plummer's analysis also explores meanings that parts of the foreign policy establishment found in the efforts to resist French testing. The State Department's Bureau of Intelligence, for instance, perceived the "extreme dismay" that newly independent African nations expressed "at the prospect of atomic fallout in 'their' continent" (pp. 79-80). That Africans might see nuclear fallout as happening on "their" continent apparently was something members of the State Department were still sorting through—and as Plummer notes, speaks to how U.S. officials saw Africans as more emotional than rational, and consequently diminished.

The breadth of topics Plummer tackles is remarkable. She does not periodize chapters by U.S. presidents, which is nice, so in her chapter approximating the Kennedy years the topics covered include: the views of Pope John XXIII; the views of Kennedy; Africanists versus Europeanists in the State Department and the White House; U.S. relations with a range of African nations and leaders; the Peace Corps; the Belgrade Conference and the Nonaligned Movement; Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam; public diplomacy efforts; the wide-ranging and shifting views among black Americans; organizations from the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) to the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa (ANLCA); Cuba and the Dominican Republic; tensions over African American sailors on shore leave from U.S. Navy ships docked in Cape Town; and the Congo crisis. Her journey

through these topics and more leads Plummer to conclude that "The 'Camelot' romance masked a conservative turn in world affairs" (p. 129).

This speaks to her overall argument that when black and white educators, government officials, corporate leaders, and foundation representatives discussed in the mid-1950s the growing demands for integration and decolonization, they anticipated at least some of the scope of changes and sought to make allies of the new insurgents. The West needed the emerging states and their peoples to win the Cold War. Yet while independence for the global South would occur, "broader critiques of the international behavior of Western power were disallowed or deemed subversive of world order" (p. 343). Plummer's exploration of the people and potentialities of these broader critiques, and the reasons for the limits of their successes, stands at the heart of the book.

Almost inevitably when offering such a wealth of information, Plummer cannot possibly develop all of the pathways and tangents that she raises. One might find some frustration, for example, that a topic such as the Peace Corps is roped in briefly and then one moves along. Even when one finds at chapter's end ties that bind—in this case the desire by elites to have top-down changes in conjunction with a volunteerism that would steer popular enthusiasm into nonradical channels—one might wish for more elaboration and connections along the way.

Plummer's research is remarkably extensive, proving that, as she comments in her introduction, careful combing of a dizzying array of domestic sources provides plenty on which to base a monumental history. Plummer fearlessly tackles the range of views among African Americans, never settling for simplistic, stock categories. The United States, having predicated national security on a bedrock of racial domination, found itself needing to change that pattern in a changing world. "Foundations, educational institutions, the mass media, and the intelligentsia assisted the state in making these only partially successful modifications," writes Plummer. "Political and cultural leaders often failed to agree among themselves about appropriate strategies. Race blinkered the vision of those hoping to topple the hierarchical order as well as those seeking to preserve it" (p. 11). Plummer's analysis is deeply textured when it comes to unraveling power and race, and the reader is rewarded for that.

As Plummer continues her analysis, her end framing is not as surprising as one might initially think. The black freedom struggle in the United States soldiered on, while decolonization in Africa still faced the "white re-

doubt” of parts of southern Africa. Even so, 1974 marked a year that saw Portugal’s Carnation Revolution with its momentous consequences for its African colonies and the coming together after nearly three decades of the Sixth Pan African Congress, which Plummer analyzes at some length. One other event from that year provides an intriguing finale: boxing’s heavyweight championship bout between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Zaire, one of that sport’s last great international events (how many people can now name the current heavyweight champion?). Bringing together the Sixth Pan African Congress and the “Rumble in the Jungle”—one more symbolic of political and social significance, the other more of cultural overtones—allows Plummer to explore the meaning of issues of race and power, society and culture, even as issues of colonialism and civil rights

remained unresolved.

Covering a period from when Cold War barriers could not block the hope to end colonialism and racism, to a shift back to more politics as usual, Plummer argues that while the United States and other Western powers made concessions in response to pressure from people of African descent, the changes sought by those peoples and nations remained incomplete. Nevertheless, Plummer sees overall an era of achievement, as “political actors from a range of nations, classes, and ethnicities joined in the search to define, extend, defend, and legitimate their respective claims to power and authority” (p. 8). For Plummer, that search for power may not have achieved the success it should have, yet still offers us a force worth further exploration from which we can continue to learn.

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