

# H-Net Reviews

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**Brenda Gayle Plummer.** *Rising Wind: Black Americans and Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xvi + 423 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4575-2; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2272-2.

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“This book differs from most ‘diplomatic’ histories in that it does not place official policy makers at the center of the narrative,” cautions Brenda Gayle Plummer at the outset of *Rising Wind: Black Americans and Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960*. Some scholars, she continues, may “read that displacement as, at worst, an indication that the work lacks legitimacy as a study of the history of foreign relations. At best, they will view it as a curious hybrid, the sort of scholarship with which they have not been comfortable” (p. 5). Indeed, it is not only unusual but refreshing to read a work concerning such a significant period of American foreign relations in which only passing references are made to individuals such as Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles, and Plummer is to be commended for embarking on a study of such breadth and originality, although not one without significant flaws.

The author begins her narrative with an overview of race and ethnicity and their relationship to U.S. foreign policy from the 1840s to the 1960s, setting the stage for her argument that despite conventional thinking, black Americans did not ignore affairs beyond the borders of the United States in favor of domestic issues including, but not limited to, relations between the races. Instead, African Americans had a longstanding interest in global issues, which was sharpened by the colonization of the African continent by imperialist European powers, which coincided with the loss of civil rights after Reconstruction. Segregated black churches and colleges, as well as the black press, were not only the loci of civil rights activity, Plummer argues, but were also “building blocks to construct an emancipatory view of race in the global setting” (p. 36). Drawing upon a wide array of sources, including archival and oral history collections, manuscript collections, interviews, government documents, papers of international organizations, and newspapers, she documents and discusses international issues concerning black Americans throughout the nation, including the South: pan-Africanism, the Italian-Ethiopian War, the rise of fascism and master race theo-

ries in Europe, World War II, the creation of the United Nations, the Cold War, and the connections among the thaw in superpower relations, the renewed emphasis on civil rights in the United States, and the independence of African nations.

The Italian-Ethiopian War of 1935-1936, coming as it did on the heels of various pan-African movements, was important to African Americans for a variety of reasons. The belligerence, overt racism, and imperialism of the Italian government brought to the forefront of political debate the issues of what colonialism meant to oppressed minorities worldwide. The ideological conflict between fascism and Communism also helped provide the Communist Party, U.S.A., with a means to build alliances with disaffected black Americans. While the ethnic tensions between Jews and blacks at this time have received much coverage in scholarly and popular literature, usually in debates over the widespread existence of black anti-Semitism, Plummer illustrates that domestic unrest in northeastern cities was not limited to blacks vs. Jews, but between Italian-Americans and blacks as well, for the Italian invasion of Ethiopia added another element to existing racial antipathies resulting from class differences and white ownership of stores in predominantly black residential areas.

The author’s discussion of black attitudes toward the Second World War and the various combatants further debunks the notion that African Americans were not as interested in foreign policy as they were about domestic conditions. Much of the ground covered here has been well traveled, particularly with regard to the “Double V” campaign for victory over fascism overseas and discrimination at home, the American military’s insistence that Jim Crow policies be implemented in overseas bases, and the British determination to exempt the colonies in the British Empire from the Atlantic Charter’s support for self-government. But the narrative’s focus on African American mistrust of Britain’s lofty claims to be fighting

for democracy and against tyranny and black Americans' support for Indian independence is an important addition to the literature on U.S. foreign policy.

The end of the Second World War brought with it a new militancy on the part of black Americans to eradicate Jim Crow policies once and for all. The push for civil liberties was fought on a variety of fronts, including the United Nations, where supporters called upon member nations to cite the United States for not adhering to the organization's charter on human rights. Significantly, the unsympathetic federal government, resorting to an argument later used by supporters of states' rights in the civil rights controversies of the 1960s, held that racial discrimination was a domestic issue not open to discussion by other authorities. Some black Americans adopted an accommodationist stance, traveling throughout the world downplaying American racial problems, and receiving positions in the foreign service under the Truman and Eisenhower administrations as a reward. Fewer retained their connections with Communist front organizations in their demands for an end to racism, with the result that opponents of racial justice could tar all supporters of civil rights (and hence critics of the government of the United States) with the brush of subversion and treason at the height of the Cold War. Plummer includes a particularly thoughtful discussion on the issues of domestic conformity and the fear of social change, illustrating throughout the book that while African American individuals and organizations had ties of various tensile strengths to Communist organizations, black interest in foreign policy was clearly not managed or created by Communists, nor were blacks who agreed with some of their views on race necessarily "dupes" of the Communists (pp. 172-73).

By the late 1950s, with the United States as the self-declared leader of the free world, it became increasingly untenable for liberals to countenance segregation and racial inequality. Supporters of civil rights pointed to the embarrassment the United States was subjected to in the international arena because of the continued existence of racial discrimination. More important, black Americans had begun to achieve civil rights victories due to a combination of successful court cases (especially the Supreme Court's decision against school segregation in *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954) and direct action (the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956). With segregation on the wane, a militant civil rights movement with an awareness of the worldwide dimensions of the freedom struggle, and a growing acceptance on the part of the Kennedy Administration that the underdeveloped and newly independent nations in Africa and elsewhere were

important insofar as the ideological struggle of the Cold War was concerned (both in terms of the Peace Corps and military engagements), few observers took seriously the contention that black Americans were unaware of or not concerned with American foreign affairs. It is thus fitting that Plummer ends her narrative in the early 1960's, concluding with a discussion of the interrelationships among the civil rights movement, the growing peace movement, newly independent African nations, "Black Power," and the escalation of the Vietnam War.

The author deserves to be commended for her contribution to the studies of American foreign policy. *Rising Wind* provides readers with both an original thesis and a novel way of looking at the role of the United Nations and civil rights organizations in the postwar era. Plummer's discourse on the State Department's ambivalence surrounding the visits of foreign dignitaries from India and African nations who were black, and its awkward attempts to plan formal visits where the guests would not come into contact with either racial discrimination or militant blacks is insightful, as is her discussion of the discrimination black soldiers still faced in the recently integrated armed forces during the Korean War. Along the way, she includes particularly memorable vignettes, including a poignant story of how a white Georgian sergeant and his wife returned home after adopting a biracial orphan overseas, and when the toddler began turning brown, they requested the courts to nullify the adoption (p. 209). Another concerned the jazz musician Charlie "Bird" Parker, who made fun of Paul Robeson during a Communist party benefit by carrying a glass of water to the stage as the singer launched into a rendition of "Water Boy." "Bebop placed considerable emphasis on artistic innovation and lacked patience for the recycling of past proletarian musical genres. The moral fervor of the Left may have struck that mellow critic as distinctly gauche" (p. 173). Nowhere is there a single, monolithic black voice; Plummer proffers the opinions and writings of people as diverse as Communist members of the National Negro Congress, Communist sympathizer Paul Robeson, intellectual and activist William E. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune of the National Council of Negro Women, diplomat Ralph Bunche, and conservative journalist George Schuyler.

Yet for all the work's significance, it has an uneven quality that is both distracting and troubling. The author goes to some lengths to critique diplomatic historians for their emphasis on grounding the discipline "in the world view of policy makers, to conflate its own authorial voices with those of official Washington, and to see as both normative and neutral the clearly ethnocen-

tric commitments of elite national leadership” (p. 36). Though she gives editors of black newspapers, letters to the editor, and internal memoranda from various black organizations their due, much of the narrative revolves around a discussion of the black elites mentioned above, even as she writes in her introduction that the work in question does not focus on the elite shapers of policy. DuBois and Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People are given special emphasis, thus undercutting her repeated claims that the NAACP’s domineering role in African American affairs had never gone unchallenged by other civil rights organizations (e.g., p. 150).

Other inconsistencies abound. For all her discussion of the segregation of defense industries and other places of war-related employment, including the armed forces in the early 1940s, and the protests leveled against it by civil rights activists concerned about the ideological soundness of being an arsenal of democracy, Plummer never once mentions A. Philip Randolph and the March on Washington Movement of 1941; her disclaimer that “[c]ompetent, detailed studies” of such subjects “now exist” does not absolve her of the need to mention a significant civil rights victory. Scholarship on the National Negro Congress’ relation to the Communist party also exists, but that does not prevent the author from devoting a sizable amount of text to that organization (p. 85).[1] She also spends much time discussing the role of labor movements in the civil rights and foreign policy arena, including the demise of labor as a force for reform in the subversive-conscious 1950s, but she hardly touches upon how black church people filled the void left by leftist labor organizers: “apart from the NAACP ... many black organizations were completely mute by the mid-1950’s” (p. 213). Given the importance of black ministers to the civil rights movement of the 1950s, not to mention church missions overseas, this is a serious omission, and a brief mention of how Baptist ministerial groups supported DuBois’ militancy in the early 1950s, and the Nashville Interdenominational Alliance protested Fisk University’s firing of a radical professor, does not do the topic justice. While Plummer discusses the support given to civil rights by the Catholic Interracial Council and its founder, the Rev. John LaFarge, S.J., in the interwar years, she never follows through with a comparable discussion of how interracial religious organizations of the 1950s, including the National Council of Churches, the Presbyterian Interracial Council, and the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity fought racial segregation on both ethical and religious grounds, and stressed the liability such discrimination posed to evangelical missions overseas.[2]

Even when addressing the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the author fails to develop the connections between that important event and the peace movement. “During the early 1960s the peace movement attempted to insert itself into the rapidly shrinking space created by tentative public acceptance of civil rights protest. Efforts to link peace and civil rights tactically and programmatically derived from activists committed to the principles of both. Martin Luther King and the Montgomery movement had lent new credence to the philosophy of nonviolence... [The peace movement did] make a conscious effort to join racial justice and foreign policy issues.” Given the significance of race and diplomacy to her thesis, one would expect more than this (p. 309). The Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacifist organization founded in the second decade of the century, sent two individuals, Glenn Smiley and Bayard Rustin, to Montgomery at the outset of the boycott to help King develop a theory of nonviolence based closely on that propounded by Mahatma Gandhi in India. FOR had also been instrumental in the establishment of the Congress of Racial Equality (which also merits only a brief mention) in 1942, which drew heavily on Indian nonviolent philosophy. As Plummer devotes a sizable portion of her book to the close and consistent attention African Americans and Indians paid to the racial situation in each other’s country, it is difficult to understand why she does not see fit to mention CORE’s or the Montgomery Improvement Association’s debt to Indian practitioners and philosophers of nonviolence.[3]

Inconsistencies are not limited to what is omitted from the text. At one point, the author decries the complacency of the 1950s:

the conformity [the Cold War] exacted played upon the desires of all citizens to reap the benefits and promise of American life. The climate of the times encouraged Americans to turn inward, away from the threats emanating from abroad. For these reasons, a perceived geographic and cultural distance from Africa and general ignorance of conditions, merged with a collective self-absorption. The lack of protest and seeming indifference of erstwhile forceful critics strengthened colonialism (p. 239).

Less than thirty pages later, she criticizes such a view:

Throughout the 1950s, a period that historical literature frequently depicts as staid, popular culture exercised a subtle, subversive influence, undermining the orthodoxies promoted by Cold War thinking. The black musical genre rhythm and blues, and its offspring, rock, al-

tered the way Americans danced, spoke, and perceived their world. Writers of the Beat Generation and their acolytes formalized a response to staid convention that was already seeping up from the core of society. Even intellectuals criticized the smug conformity of the age, ineffective foreign policies, growing decadence—often confused with the oppositional popular culture itself—and the continuing immorality of racism (pp. 268-69).

Earlier in the work, she describes how black newspaper editors and publishers tended to be more conservative than their readers, who often had a more liberal, if not downright leftist, viewpoint, but the “trepidation that these editors and publishers expressed [over the perils of Communism] rarely found voice, however, in their own media,” for these “steadfast Republicans ... also understood ... the black public’s inclinations” (pp. 58-59). This very well may be true, but the author does not prove it. The conservative viewpoints were expressed in 1932 for a poll taken by the NAACP’s journal *The Crisis*, whereas the more liberal opinions were culled from black newspaper stories featured by the Associated Negro Press five years later, in 1937. Plummer gives the dates and sources in her text, but appears not to fully understand their significance and the discrepancy in using such material for purposes of comparison. In 1932, most black Americans were Republicans. By 1937, the New Deal programs had been of signal importance in bringing about the political realignment of blacks into the Democratic fold; the interim had also witnessed the American recognition of the Soviet Union and the rise of the Popular Front, which would have tempered concerns over Communist ideology in some quarters.

One would find it easier to ignore such incongruities if these were only isolated incidents. Unfortunately, repetition and error are common throughout the work. The National Negro Congress is introduced several times; one individual is twice referred to as a “prominent bibliophile”; and the schedule for the Dumbarton Oaks meeting is repeated twice in as many pages. The author uses the same quotation twice from the Commission to Study the Organization of the Peace’s report *International Safeguard of Human Rights* with fewer than thirty pages between them, yet gives two different dates for the report, 1944 and 1941 (according to the endnotes, 1944 appears to be the correct date). Nor do these mistakes appear to be simply typographical errors. Less than careful scholarship is evident in other areas. Harold Ickes is erroneously identified as Secretary of Commerce, a mistake that is rectified thirty pages later when he is correctly described as Secretary of the Interior. Plummer brings the German invasion of the Soviet Union forward by a year,

citing 1940 rather than 1941 as the correct date; in the same paragraph, she places Winston Churchill in Washington, D.C., for the signing of the Atlantic Charter in August 1941, when in fact that document was signed off the coast of Newfoundland (pp. 170, 190; 70; 118-20; 115, 138; 114; 84). At one point, the author criticizes Franklin Roosevelt for not coming to the aid of the Ethiopians in 1935. Congress had just passed the first Neutrality Act, and while Roosevelt did not appreciate being bound to it, he acceded to it, an unfortunate decision according to the author, for in fact “he had the right to declare war...” (p. 48). Such confusion on the part of an American historian regarding the basic constitutional prerogatives of the executive and legislative branches of government is deeply troubling.

In the end, it is difficult to endorse this book enthusiastically. This is unfortunate, because there is considerable value in Plummer’s work, particularly the new voice that she gives to a people whose views on American foreign policy have been largely discounted as unimportant, or, worse, nonexistent. Yet the problems inherent in the proofreading, the use of sources, and basic conclusions are more than vexing. In her introduction, she unfairly criticizes more traditional scholars for their reliance on studies of national elite leaders, for the “state as a unit of analysis offers incomparable ease of reference and seduces the scholar along familiar, readily accessible paths that too often lead to self-fulfilling conclusions” (p. 5). Given the errors in her work, such condescension is clearly misplaced. This is not to suggest in any way that *Rising Wind* “lacks legitimacy,” for there is much important information to be gleaned from its pages. It is apparent, however, that if a scholar such as Brenda Gayle Plummer wishes to keep her work from being dismissed out of hand by more conservative practitioners of the history of foreign relations, she needs to undertake a more stringent attitude toward her scholarship.

#### Notes

[1]. Among other sources on the NNC, Plummer cites John Baxter Streater, “The National Negro Congress, 1936-1947” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1981), and Joseph C. Mouldos, “From Browderism to Peaceful Coexistence: An Analysis of Developments in the Communist Position on the American Negro,” *Phylon* 25, no. 4 (1964): 79-90, *ibid.*, pp. 360n18; 360n19. For recent scholarship on Randolph and the MOWM, see Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 247-252.

[2]. A second cousin of Ross Barnett, the avowed seg-

regationist governor of Mississippi who vowed to prevent the integration of the University of Mississippi, bitterly assailed him for making her missionary work in Nigeria all but impossible, as such tactics seemed to make a travesty of the message that Christ died for all people. "You are supposed to be holding the lifelines for us, and you are twisting them into a noose of racism to strangle our message. Communists do not need to work against the preaching of the Gospel here; you are doing it quite adequately." Quoted in James W. Silver, "Mississippi: The Closed Society," *The Journal of Southern History* 30

(February 1964): 9.

[3]. See Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984), pp. 62-63; 157-66; August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 3-27.

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