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Review by **Thomas J. Noer, Carthage College**

Many years ago, when I was a new PhD, I attended my first conference of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR). The group met as a whole and then split for individual geographic sessions. Groups of eager scholars marched off to the European room, the Asian room, the Latin American room, and the Middle East room until I was left alone. I finally asked the organizer: "What about Africa?" He pondered a minute and finally suggested perhaps I could join the Latin American group. I went to the book display.

Ryan Irwin's provocative article illustrates how the scholarship on U.S. relations with Africa has grown and broadened in the past three decades. His footnotes document not only the volume of publications on the topic, but the increasingly innovative and complex nature of the scholarship. Not only have there been numerous "traditional" studies of American foreign policy towards the continent, but also works on race and diplomacy, colonial and decolonization theory, analysis of economic development, works that incorporate cultural studies, and efforts to place Africa within the broader area of international history.

Irwin adds to this rich literature by contending that the rapid decolonization of Africa and Asia led to "new themes" that "were reshaping how politicians approached international affairs." "The world was in the midst of a revolutionary transformation" that forced both American policy makers and historians to make a "choice between the Cold War narrative of postwar events and the emerging story of postcolonial emancipation." (897-898)

To illustrate this theme he focuses on South Africa's racial policy of apartheid in "the brief moment between 1960 and 1963" and how independent Africans, American diplomats,

and the government of South Africa analyzed and responded to the issue. Although apartheid and international criticism of the policy began in 1948, the decolonization of Africa elevated it into a major issue by 1960 and, Irwin argues, “the apartheid question became a microcosm of the postcolonial era.” (901)

After the massive foreign criticism of South Africa following the 1960 Sharpeville massacre of peaceful protesters against apartheid, the militant Afrikaner newspaper *Die Burger* lamented: “It is a bitter thing to be forced into the role of the skunk of the world.”¹ To Africans, the world needed to unite to destroy the “skunk;” to American diplomats, the problem was how to reconcile the “odor” of apartheid with the perceived strategic necessity of maintaining relations with South Africa; for white South Africans, the issue was how to cover up the smell and make the skunk seem vital to the Cold War battle with communism.

To Africans, apartheid was “an attack on Africa as a whole” and the last remnant of white colonialism. (914) Its destruction was crucial to the creation of unity on the continent and to assert true independence. South Africa’s racial policies were morally repugnant and a test case of America’s verbal commitment to freedom and equality. They pursued the issue in the United Nations (U.N.), in meetings of the Organization of African Unity, within the British Commonwealth, and in unilateral exchanges with the United States. Africans denied the assertion that apartheid was a Cold War issue: it was foremost a moral issue.

The problem was that John Kennedy and many of his advisors did not see apartheid in the same way. They were willing to verbally denounce apartheid, support U.N. condemnations (as long as they did not contain economic or political sanctions), and in 1963 instituted an arms embargo on South Africa. They were not willing to unite with the African nations in an unequivocal campaign to isolate South Africa and force the end of its racial policies.

Kennedy’s hesitation in confronting apartheid is not a new story. Just as he viewed the domestic civil rights movement as a political rather than a moral issue, he saw apartheid as part of the global Cold War. Approving segregationist judges was the price of maintaining congressional support for his policies at home and the taint of apartheid was the price of keeping an ally in the battle against communism abroad. Africa was important, but not as important as the fight against the Soviet Union. The UN was important, but not worth the risk of losing allies in the Cold War. Liberals and African-Americans were important, but their support was not worth the price of weakening the

¹ Quoted in Colin Legum and Margaret Legum, *South Africa: Crisis for the West* (New York: Praeger, 1964), 235.

east-west global struggle. Kennedy was effective in courting individual African diplomats, but not willing to support their demands for a worldwide assault on apartheid.²

Irwin's account of the third actor in the apartheid drama is the most original and revealing section of the article. Supported by materials in the South African archives, he shows how Pretoria monitored and responded to the American debate over apartheid. South African diplomats and analysts displayed a remarkable understanding of American politics and of Kennedy's foreign policy. They began a massive propaganda campaign to convince the U.S. of the vital importance of South Africa. They portrayed their nation as a bastion of stability on an instable continent, a lone outpost of Christianity in a pagan region, and a staunch ally in the Cold War surrounded by radical socialist nations dedicated to neutrality in the battle with communism. They also reminded Americans that South Africa provided gold, diamonds, and other crucial materials vital to the economy of western states. It was a massive and masterful performance and Irwin's account is fascinating.

In the end, Irwin concludes that the inability of African nations to convince the U.S. to impose economic sanctions on South Africa "seems best told as the failure of African nationalism." (925) Perhaps, but the African nations had a difficult task. Although they were often eloquent in their efforts to equate apartheid with colonialism and entrenched racism, they lacked the power to overcome ingrained east-west views of the world. They not only had to overcome the prevailing Cold War vision but also counter the economic importance of South Africa and Pretoria's successful campaign to court favor among the American public and politicians. They lost the battle and it would take them over three decades to eventually win the war.

Among the many strengths of Ryan Irwin's piece is his analysis of how the postcolonial decades led to new and complex issues in international relations. As he notes, American diplomats were slow to recognize that their narrow vision of the world was becoming obsolete, but the "winds of change" did not diminish. He also demonstrates that for historians, as well as diplomats, the view of the world shifted. We no longer can rely on the simplistic notions of the past. To write truly "international history," we must incorporate new approaches and issues and move beyond the study of individual nations or even single geographic regions. Perhaps in future meetings historians of U.S. foreign relations will not move into separate rooms but stay in a single space undivided by geography but united by dedication to a real global understanding of international relations.

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² See Thomas J. Noer, "New Frontiers and Old Priorities in Africa," in Thomas G. Paterson (ed.), *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 253-283.

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Boer, and Yankee: The U.S. and South Africa, 1870-1920 (1978); *Cold War and Black Liberation: The U.S. and White Africa, 1948-1968* (1985); and *Soapy: A Biography of G. Mennen Williams* (2005). He is currently working on the politics of Frank Lloyd Wright.

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