Thomas Borstelmann, 'Hedging Our Bets and Buying Time': John Kennedy and Racial Revolution in the American South and Southern Africa, ***Diplomatic History,*** **Volume 24, Issue 3 (Summer 2000): 435-463.**

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In his article, Borstelmann explores the convergence of the crisis of black-white relations in both domestic politics and foreign policy that confronted US President John Kennedy during his period in office beginning in 1961and ending with his assassination in November 1963. Kennedy's brief tenure and the tragedy of his death in a major Southern state within months of his announcement in June 1963 of his plans to accelerate the legislative process of domestic racial reform have combined to make his Presidency one that continues to intrigue historians and to raise unanswerable questions about various policies that he would have pursued had he escaped his fate in Dallas. Borstelmann skillfully evades an escape into wishful thinking and confronts the dilemma that the polarization of black-white relations posed for Kennedy in both domestic politics and foreign policy.

Borstelmann argues that Kennedy's handling of the crisis of race relations inside of the United States mirrored his response to the situation in Southern Africa he sought to contain the possibilities of racial conflict between two constituencies that were of central importance to the pursuit of the American competition with the communist powers and their allies. He shows Kennedy's strategy of straddling the racial divide in order not alienate either black or white constituencies. In the United States, Kennedy pursued a strategy aimed at co-opting the Civil Rights Movement in order to control the process of racial reform while seeking to avoid confrontation with the Southern wing of the Democratic Party upon which he depended in Congress for support to enact legislation and policies at a national level. In Angola, the 'straddle' resulted in supplying the Portuguese government with Americans weapons to suppress the growing anti-colonial insurgency and simultaneously providing assistance to the victims of the use of those weapons in refugee centers outside of the colony. The policy in Angola epitomized Kennedy's effort to balance the interests of the colonial powers in the region against the campaign by African nationalists and their allies to bring an end to European colonial rule and white minority regimes across the face of Africa. In effect, the American Dilemma discerned by Gunnar Myrdal in 1944 - confronting the issue of racial inequity in American society in a period of increasing international prominence for the United States -had by the early 1960s become a problem that systematically linked the politics of race in the United States with the politics of race in the European colonies and white minority regimes of Central and Southern Africa.

Borstelmann also illustrates the way in which Kennedy's strategy of 'straddle' shifted over time. Initially, Kennedy was rhetorically very supportive of African nationalism but by 1963, he had moved to a position that was more supportive of the remaining colonial powers in Southern Africa and the apartheid regime in South Africa. In domestic politics, however, he had initially

been very measured in his support for racial reform but by June 1963 had decided to accelerate the pace of reform. These shifts reflected changes in the different contexts that required Kennedy to adopt pragmatic responses to the evolution of the crises. In Southern Africa the colonial and apartheid regimes in Africa had been able to withstand the initial challenges to their survival by 1963. And in the United States Kennedy had come to the recognition that the pace of domestic reform could no longer be slowed. It is a measure of Kennedy's political genius that after having won the 1960 election by the narrowest of margins, he was able to fashion responses to crises in Berlin, Cuba, Laos, British Guiana, Great Britain, NATO, the Congo, Southern Africa, and the American South. At the same time, he was preoccupied with ensuring that he won re-election in 1964. Perhaps, the 'straddle' was intrinsic to Kennedy's style of decision-making as President it was not simply a function of the racial polarization in the American South and Southern Africa.

Borstelmann has provided an interesting perspective on the inter-relationship between American history and African history in which racial conflict provides the nexus through which those linkages have been mediated - a feature of the history of the two regions since the period of New World slavery to the present. Nonetheless, there are several questions that arise from the evidence and the interpretation that have been provided by Borstelmann.

First, Kennedy served as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Sub-Committee on Africa prior to becoming President and that position brought him into contact with the policy concerns of both African Americans and Africans. It is not inconceivable that the exposure to the issues within the sub-Committee's purview may have provided him with a nuanced understanding of the "impact of the color bar" upon the lives of those who suffered from that disadvantage. Kennedy's exposure to the issues of race transcended the American context and that exposure may have been critical to the ease he displayed as President when interacting with people of color both American and non-American.

Borstelmann points to Kennedy's Roman Catholic background in a society in which anti-Catholic sentiment has been deeply embedded as a factor that may have "disinclined him to discriminate blindly against others." It should also be remembered that African Americans, Jews, members of other racial minority groups, white racial moderates, and white segregationists were fixtures in the Democratic Party in which Kennedy had forged his political career. Kennedy proved in the 1960 campaign and until his death to be very adept at fashioning inter-ethnic coalitions to support his policies and that ability should not be underestimated in any assessment of his handling the struggle over civil rights. He may have been the only President in the period between FDR and Bill Clinton to demonstrate a deft touch in dealing with the complexities of inter-racial politics in the United States even as he faced a level of racial polarization that neither Roosevelt nor Clinton confronted.

Second, the importance of Birmingham in 1963 was greater than the images of white Southern brutality inflicted against black children and adults. In 1960, under the Eisenhower administration, the State Department had issued a very critical statement on the South African government's handling of unrest that led to the Sharpeville massacre. Bull Connor and Birmingham revealed that the United States was not far removed from comparison with the odious policies pursued by the South African regime. Police brutality and other evidence of white racism in the United States did little to confer moral authority in American foreign policy.

In effect, the Kennedy administration was aware by 1963 that it faced a crisis of credibility among domestic and foreign audiences that required it to move forward with the agenda of racial reform. A failure to do so would create an impression that, like his predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower, Kennedy had become a hostage of white supremacist sentiment in American politics. Birmingham was Kennedy's Rubicon and, given his political acumen, he undoubtedly understood that he faced damnation whether he crossed it or not. Kennedy, in announcing his plans to submit civil rights legislation to Congress, understood that he was making a fateful decision to accelerate the pace of racial reform and that the political consequences that flowed from such a decision would forever define his legacy.

Third, given the complexities of Southern Africa during this period it would have been useful for Borstelmann to provide some insight into the British factor in American decision-making. As William Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson have argued, the decolonization of the British Empire became an Anglo-American joint enterprise. [See Wm. Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson, The Imperialism of Decolonization, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, vol. 22 no. 3, September 1994, 462 511.] In the wake of the Suez crisis American and British policymakers embarked upon the thorny process of redefining the scope and areas of responsibility within the Anglo-American relationship. In the early 1960s, as Britain shifted tack to take advantage of "the winds of change" British policymakers sought American support for British policy in Southern Africa. In return, the Conservative government in Britain went to extraordinary lengths to accommodate the pressures from Kennedy and his advisors to remove Cheddi Jagan from power in British Guiana. This redefinition of strategic responsibilities within the Anglo-American alliance may have been a critical factor that allowed Britain and South Africa to blunt the challenge to apartheid and white minority rule in Southern Africa. It was highly unlikely that the Kennedy administration would be unaware of the implications of allowing Britain and South Africa a free hand in Southern Africa.

In addition, the United States was still on the Gold Standard in the early 1960s. It is not evident that Kennedy would have been enthusiastic about accelerating change in South Africa a major source of gold and a critical component of the international trading and payments system in which the United States acted as the quasi-Central Bank. The economic dimensions of the US-South African relationship, and its implications for US policy in the region, as well as for America's international economic primacy, are not well developed in Borstelmann's article and one hopes that he will be able to return to these issues in greater depth in future publications.

Fourth, Borstelmann explores the ways in which the Kennedy administration succumbed to the strictures of solidarity with whites in Central and Southern Africa in the shift towards its increasing conservatism in dealing with African nationalism. That shift away from support for African nationalism paved the way for several presidential administrations to be identified as closet supporters of apartheid. The extent of the American divorce from the reality of African politics would become evident in 1975. As the Americans were being driven out of Vietnam by the North Vietnamese army in that year, the Ford administration endorsed the efforts of the apartheid regime in South Africa to re-establish client regimes in Mozambique and Angola after the collapse of Portuguese colonial rule. Soviet and Cuban intervention in Southern Africa led to South African military defeat and paved the way for Zimbabwean independence, brokered by the Carter administration. Despite support from the Reagan administration, a prolonged military

effort by South Africa to arrest and reverse the changes in Southern Africa failed. The end of Portuguese and British colonial rule in Southern Africa had undermined the viability of the apartheid regime and led to its demise by the mid-1990s.

As in the case of the American encounter with Vietnamese nationalism, American acknowledgement of the legitimacy of black liberation in South Africa would only come through the political and military failure of an American client regime that had been a pillar of America's Cold War strategy. Kennedy, at the time of his death, was treading along the path that future administrations would follow in both Vietnam and Southern Africa. Why would Kennedy who had criticized the Eisenhower administration for its policy in Vietnam and championed African nationalism pursue policies designed to undermine both Vietnamese and African nationalism? Perhaps, despite his best intentions, Kennedy was unable to transcend the legacy of white supremacy in American life.

In the early 1960s, the sympathies of Kennedy and his liberal appointees for African nationalism reflected his administration's efforts to redefine the terms of American engagement with Africa. His abandonment of that strategy in Southern Africa by 1963 was evidence of his inability to overcome the influence of the fellow travelers of apartheid and white minority rule including those in the White House staff, in the State Department, in the Senate and in the House of Representatives, and in other agencies such as the CIA and the Pentagon. Many were uncomfortable with black liberation in both Southern Africa and the American South. Kennedy's efforts to redefine US policy towards African nationalism and to accelerate the agenda of racial reform may have been indicators of his status as an outsider to the culture of white supremacy with which the ethos of American governance was so heavily imbued. Kennedy's willingness to rethink the "conventional wisdom" was also symbolic of the central paradox of American life since the founding of the Republic - redeeming the promise of equality in a society constructed upon the premise of racial inequality. Kennedy could not escape the power of that paradox and his tenure as President was shaped by its continuing grip on the American body politic.

In the final analysis, John Kennedy's response to the twin crises in the American South and Southern Africa that had been triggered by the movement for black liberation in both regions is worthy of detailed study. Like Harold Isaacs, Martin Kilson, Paul Gordon Lauren, Thomas Noer, Elliott Skinner, Penny von Eschen, and others, Borstelmann has broadened the search for ways to conceptualize the comparative, transnational, and international dimensions of the historiography of American race relations in the 20th century. In addition, his exploration of the ambiguities of the Kennedy administration's desire to straddle the racial divide in both regions effectively illustrates the linkages between domestic politics and foreign policy in the evolution of American race relations.

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