



***Holding the Line:
Race, Racism, and American Foreign Policy
toward Africa, 1953-1961***
Roundtable Review

Reviewed Works:

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Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Daniel Byrne, Anne Foster

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Author's Response by George White, York College, CUNY

I wish to thank Thomas Maddux and the H-Diplo staff for putting together this Roundtable forum on my book *Holding the Line: Race, Racism, and American Foreign Policy Toward Africa, 1953-1961*. I also owe a true debt of gratitude to Dr.'s Byrne and Foster for participating in this event with such thorough, evenhanded, and thought-provoking reviews of the book. Their insight and constructive commentary are welcome and surely will help expand the dimensions of analysis on future projects, especially as I develop the follow-up works to this initial monograph.

At the outset, we must place *Holding the Line* in the context of post-9/11 America. As with most young scholars, I have been influenced by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath, particularly in communities of color. One thing that struck me deeply was the reflexive invocations by most Americans of principles like "democracy," "justice," and "civilization," ideals that often hide social inequality and disparities in power, among other things. In fact, it seems as no coincidence that the Manichean response to 9/11 completely overwhelmed alternative world-views of - and priorities for - global justice, for example those positions articulated at the United Nations' World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa just days before the attacks.

Holding the Line is more than just a historical examination of the power of race in shaping America's Cold War diplomacy. It is an exploration of the ways in which racial ideologies limit the pursuit of justice, denude the cultivation of democracy, and call into question the idea of civilization or the identity of the "civilized." As an African American, I come from a community – or, better yet, a collection of communities – intimately familiar with terrorist activities, the "clash of civilizations," and the quest for justice. Terrorist acts like lynchings,

George W. White, Jr. is an Assistant Professor of History at York College, City University of New York (CUNY). White received a JD from Harvard Law School in 1987 and, after practicing law, returned to school and received a PhD from Temple University in 2001. White has written scholarly articles on U.S. diplomacy toward Africa in the 1950s, the development of public housing in Knoxville in the 1940s, and efforts of Black business owners to enter into contracts with government entities. He is the author of "An Overview of the Impact of Race on American Foreign Policy Toward Africa," National Association of African American Studies Conference, NAAS Monograph 2001, and "The Impact of Race on American Foreign Policy Toward Africa," The Society of Research on African Cultures Conference, SOARC, Journal of African Studies, 2001. During the 2001-2002 academic year, White served as the Geraldine R. Dodge Postdoctoral Fellow at the Rutgers Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience. As the Dodge Fellow, White helped conceive, plan, and stage a televised town-hall discussion of the events and aftermath of 9/11 entitled "Why Us?, Why Here?, What Now?". "Why Us" aired on New Jersey public television in March and September 2002 and was nominated for a regional Emmy award. He has a book-length manuscript under review by academic presses and is working as the editor of the papers of Rev. Robert Boston Dokes, a World War II chaplain who served in the Pacific Theater.

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mob violence, forced removal, or massive resistance to school desegregation – and the official responses thereto – do more than negatively influence the civic behavior of the targeted groups. These acts, at the very least, force us to examine the fragile nature of democracy and the relationship between the citizen and her nation. Since relatively little has been said or written about American diplomacy and Black communities – during the 1950s or in the contemporary period – it seemed like a wonderful point of embarkation on a journey through intellectual terrain both familiar and exotic. Thus, this scholarship consciously speaks to multiple generations, acting on the admonition of another Southerner that “the past is not past.”

I owe a tremendous debt to the scholars who have blazed a trail for me, including Brenda Plummer, Cary Fraser, Piero Gleijeses, Carol Anderson, and Penny Von Eschen, among others. Accordingly, the objective with *Holding the Line* was to make an original contribution to supplement our evolving understanding of race and American foreign relations. As a way of continuing to investigate the power of race in the realm of foreign policy, I rejected the idea of Whiteness as normative. In keeping with scholars in Critical Race Theory and related fields – like Derrick Bell, Bell Hooks, David Roediger, and Sumi Cho – I began by seeking to answer two foundational questions: 1) how does Whiteness influence American diplomacy?; and 2) how does Whiteness survive in a period of intense crisis and critique?

Although *Holding the Line* argues forcefully about the impact and burdens of race and racial ideologies, Dr. Byrne is correct to note that the monograph is not monocausal. *Holding the Line* does not ignore other important factors in U.S.-Africa relations, like the stability of NATO or Free World access to strategic resources. Instead, the book acknowledges them but, by necessity, lays them aside precisely because scholars know them so well; in relative terms, these and other factors, like national security, have received enormous attention and focus. For instance, it seems more urgent to move beyond the question of Free World access to strategic resources and to the very premise of a “Free World.” From the perspective of Africans, the West is not simply a place of liberty, democracy, and respect for individual merit; for most Africans it is the root of slavery, forced labor, and imperialism. Does the nature of the Cold War change if we flip the notion of a “Free World” on its head? One would think so.

The case studies in *Holding the Line* explicitly answer the first question by exploring American diplomacy toward an ally, potential allies, and perceived antagonists. Having established the theoretical approach in the initial chapters, the book seeks to pursue consistently the line of argument through the examination of U.S. relations with Ethiopia, Ghana, the Union of South Africa, and the Congo. The case studies illuminate the connections between domestic and foreign policy and reveal precious little distinction between America’s discourse and behavior toward Black friends and enemies. As such, the Cold War in Africa seems less about competing political ideologies in the zero sum game of “West v. East” and more to do with the preservation of power. In this light, championing

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“democracy” is better translated as fostering the predictability of political results and social outcomes.

With respect to the second question, the power of Whiteness survives intense scrutiny through a redemption of the racial status quo. Through the rhetoric of the Cold War, American policymakers and statesmen were able to impose a re-visioning of the West that contrasted starkly with the lived experiences of racial minorities in the U.S. and the global majority dwelling in Africa, Asia, the Arab world, and Latin America. Dr. Foster is correct that the book could have expanded upon the concept. While the issue of “sanctuary” is specifically addressed with respect to the Congo, it certainly is implied in the other case studies.

Since the book moves from the premise that race is socially constructed, the effort to address White Privilege is an attempt to be authoritative, not exhaustive. Foster is correct to note that “in the particular cases examined in this book, race does primarily boil down to Black and White.” The tight focus in *Holding the Line* is necessary but not indicative that the book is trapped by an assumption that race is a simple binary. The theoretical apparatus is intended to explain the nuances of the Black-White relationship but it should be adaptable to other racial encounters as well, even those outside the scope of the monograph.

Both Byrne and Foster offer instructive comments on the “gender analysis” in *Holding the Line*. Admittedly, this portion of the cases studies deserves greater development. Like many other young scholars, I have been moved by the call of Emily Rosenberg - and the work of Kristin Hoganson, among others - to explore the gender dimensions of American diplomacy. Consequently, there were two things that the book did attempt: 1) acknowledging the alternative masculine paradigm of African leaders as they confronted U.S. rhetoric or plans; and 2) taking seriously the lives of Black women as a meaningful part of Black communities. The latter objective is the one to which Byrne and Foster spoke. More often than not, when scholars – here, I include myself - discuss the history of Black communities, they do so by focusing on the lives, goals, or achievements of Black men. The book seeks to avoid repeating this reductionist and misogynist approach by raising the fates of women in Cold War Ethiopia, Ghana, South Africa, and the Congo. Thus, the book aimed to discuss the impact of US foreign relations on them as Black people, not as women. Certainly, their lives are worthy of more expansive contemplation and investigation.

Foster also raises the interesting question of ranking the various factors that inflected U.S. diplomacy. Foster’s proposed hierarchy of influences might be a useful way to “discern when...racism made a difference and what difference it made.” Perhaps because I consider myself a Critical Race Theory scholar, I am unsure whether a ranking of influences is possible or beneficial. When considering the myriad of explanations or rationalizations for American diplomacy – economic, strategic, ideological, racial, geo-political, gendered, etc. – I am much more comfortable exploring the spaces in which these phenomena intersect. At present, I am convinced that the intersection of these phenomena - and the resultant

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dynamic tension - is the most fruitful place of inquiry because all of the factors shape one another. Foster's call to do more comparative work is significant and deserves our attention; I did not take it to be "churlish." To that end, Foster's work in U.S. relations toward Asian countries and Byrne's work on Algeria are instructive. It is true that U.S. consuls did not arrive in Africa in the late 1950s nor did they arrive as blank slates. However, their gaze lingered over the contours of colonial administration, demonstrating little interest in or curiosity about indigenous activists or aspirations. To that end, Eisenhower officials seemed to know as little about Kwame Nkrumah and his rise to power in Ghana as they did about the "Negro bishop" who led the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Byrne's statements regarding the book's "ability to trace these racial paradigms through each case and make links between United States domestic and foreign policy" is precisely a target for which the book was aiming. By examining American foreign policy through the lens of Whiteness, it seems easier to ascertain the meaning of democracy - for example - as it applied to Americans and to Africans. The Eisenhower administration inverted the dictates of Locke and Rousseau by informing Black communities in Africa that the purpose of their new or potential nation-states was to serve the interests of the "Free World" rather than the interests of their citizens. At home, the administration imparted a similar message to African American communities - that the quest for social justice, or "freedom," was less important than assuaging the fears of White communities and respecting the expectations of White entitlement.

Finally, Foster is insightful when she opines that American foreign policy has been shaped by the personal and structural racism of America's past and present. However, I am less sanguine about a general scholarly or intellectual consensus on this point, as reflected in her comments: "Would anyone today...argue that U.S. foreign policy was, or indeed is, color blind? I doubt it." I disagree with Foster here not merely because of my engagement with some members of SHAFR (the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations) or with a number of my undergraduate and graduate students, but because much of America has embraced a disingenuous ethic of color-blindness that obscures or questions the significance of race in our present and immediate past.

It is not uncommon to see television pundits exalt the supposedly new, "post-racial" epoch in America. Like you, I have no idea what that means but based on the context I interpret the slogan to mean that, at a minimum, we have moved beyond "all that race stuff." Commentators, judges, and politicians also have used this rhetoric to recast 20th century segregationists, for instance, as traditionalists who simply invoked a First Amendment right of association to defend a time-honored custom. Just as importantly, there has been precious little discussion of race with regard to the War on Terror or the occupation of Iraq, situations in which White entitlement and innocence have been invoked clearly and repeatedly. Is there a bright line distinction between prison abuses in, say, California or Florida and those at Abu Ghraib? Is there a meaningful difference between President Bush's refusal to talk with the leaders of certain nations and his unwillingness to talk to the NAACP?

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Closer to the point, where is the dialogue about race and the prosecution of the War on Terror in Africa, with its abundant contradictions and double-talk? Could it be that most of us assume a color-blindness in that situation because the chief spokesperson for such tactics, the Secretary of State, is a Black woman? Perhaps that is the case. If so, how different is today's deployment of Condi Rice by the Bush administration from the State Department's deployment of the NAACP's Edith Sampson as a propaganda weapon against the widely-reported abuses of and hardships faced by African Americans in the 1950s, the latter feat rather elegantly described by Anderson in her brilliant work "Eyes Off the Prize?"

It is for these reasons, and many others, that I take seriously both the praise and the challenges offered by the reviewers. The comparative work suggested by Foster would be very enlightening. Further, Byrne's exhortation for scholars to continue this line of research in order to expand or complicate our understanding of African decolonization is compelling. *Holding the Line* is an important scholarly step toward those ends. In some ways, it also is a tribute to a number of my professional colleagues, to the work of my many mentors at Temple University, and to the gurus at the Rutgers Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience. As an apprenticing scholar, I hope to continue this research precisely because a great deal of work remains, a great deal of deliberate, thoughtful engagement remains necessary, and – as the young John Coltrane responded to Miles Davis's plea to stop playing such long solos – I still have a lot to say.

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