

Linda Heywood, Allison Blakely, Charles Stith, Joshua C. Yesnowitz, eds.. *African Americans in U.S. Foreign Policy: From the Era of Frederick Douglass to the Age of Obama*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 264 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03887-7.



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Nearly seven years into the administration of America's first black president, Barack Obama, former US ambassador to Senegal and Nigeria, Walter Carrington, wonders, "As opportunities for blacks to be makers and practitioners of American foreign policy expanded ... how much difference has it made to the issues that have historically most concerned African Americans?" (p. xix). The edited volume *African Americans in U.S. Foreign Policy: From the Era of Frederick Douglass to the Age of Obama* addresses this question and others, asking: "what are the policy implications ... and effects of the 'race variable' in American foreign policy?" (p. 1). Covering an expansive period from the Civil War to the Obama presidency, the edited collection surveys a wide range of topics, from nineteenth-century African American diplomatic appointments to "cultural ambassadors" during the Cold War to more recent black government officials like Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice (p. 2). Overall, the book is a welcome throwback. Historians of both diplomatic and African American history have moved away

from studying elite policymakers and have shifted largely from foreign *policy* to the broader notion of foreign *relations*. Elites have always—and still—matter. This volume, despite some shortcomings, shows there are still many enriching avenues of inquiry along these lines.

The chapters center on a study of "the influential roles played by—and the constraints imposed upon—African Americans who have represented the nation abroad in various capacities" (p. 5). This central tension runs continuously and coherently through three more specific sub-themes. First is "the emergence of African Americans as a political force and views of political representation" (p. 2). The book's second theme relates to issues of identity—"the paradox of loyalty"—or contending allegiances to race and nation (p. 3). The third subtheme delves into the realm of cultural diplomacy. Chapters in this vein examine such prominent African Americans as athletes and musicians who aimed to influence US foreign

policy outside the realms of formal policymaking and government positions.

The chapters are organized into three sections: “Early African American Diplomatic Appointments,” “African American Participation in Foreign Affairs through Civil Society,” and “The Advent of the Age of Obama.” The first section is the strongest in terms of adherence to the volume’s stated focus and goals, originality, and the avenues its chapters generate for future research. Allison Blakely opens this section, assessing the first generation of African American diplomatic appointees. He details the careers and experiences of understudied and underappreciated early black diplomats like John L. Waller, Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, and Richard T. Greener. Blakely argues that these African American officials were largely chosen for patronage or tokenism, in order to woo “the newly enfranchised black electorate” during the post-Civil War era (p. 14). Yet this political patronage could be seen as a sign of political incorporation and racial progress. Blakely’s chapter highlights some of the tensions African Americans faced that run throughout the book: the influential roles played by and constraints placed upon African Americans in US foreign policy. Although the State Department was “the first major government department to appoint blacks to positions of prestige,” Blakely shows that these positions were fraught with challenges and black diplomats received little acclaim from the US government or white society for their impressive work (p. 13). Blakely has written elsewhere about Greener’s career, but his chapter in this volume presents several other African American diplomats whose careers merit future research.[1]

Chapters by Jeffrey Stewart and Michael Krenn complete the volume’s first section. Stewart’s provocative essay examines what he labels the “New Negro foreign policy” through the careers of Alain Locke and Ralph Bunche. He asks, “To what extent would [African Americans] have to ‘mask’ their criticality toward Western policy

on Africa in the very act of trying to change it?” (p. 32). African American intellectuals and diplomats like Locke and Bunche, he argues, walked a “tightrope”; they had “to tell enough of the truth about white discourses of domination to be credible ... yet also be measured in the indictment lest the leadership shut his mouth” (p. 48). According to Stewart, Bunche was much more successful at this balancing act than Locke, whose report to the Foreign Policy Association, “The Mandate System: A New Code of Empire,” was rejected and Locke embarrassed, because it was not “black enough” for a progressive white audience that had counted on him to play the token black radical.

Krenn deploys Carl Rowan’s career to better understand the connections between race, US foreign policy, and the Cold War. Krenn deftly continues tracing the thread of tension between “diplomatic tokenism” and signs of racial progress in black diplomats’ experiences (p. 60). Rowan was a career diplomat, serving as deputy assistant secretary of state for public affairs, ambassador to Finland, and director of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). All the while, he was an ardent defender of America’s racist domestic policies, believing it a Cold War imperative that US propaganda about the nation’s civil rights problems be put into proper context. Krenn argues that Rowan was certainly naïve, but also perhaps savvy, self-interested, and ambitious. While tenuously fitting into a section on “early” African American diplomats, Krenn’s chapter concludes the most focused, provocative, and original segment of the volume.

Part 2 shifts focus from African American diplomats to African American participation in foreign affairs through civil society. These four chapters examine “extra-institutional forms of African American diplomacy,” including Baptist missionaries, American soldiers, black athletes, and jazz musicians (p. 2). Brandi Hughes’s study of the Foreign Mission Board (FMB) of the National Baptist Convention (NBC) is the most intriguing and exhaustively researched piece. She explores

how black Baptists, during the counter-Reconstruction of the American South, utilized foreign missions organizations to Africa and the construction of a nationwide NBC to create “a range of political power that was routinely denied to free black men living in the antebellum US” (p. 90). These organizational avenues presented African Americans opportunities to serve as pastors, colonial officials, and diplomatic mediators. Baptist missions networks produced forums on Africa like the FMB’s periodical, *Mission Herald*, where black Baptists posed questions and posited insights that “cultivated a populist mode of diplomacy for African and African American Christians living at the nexus of empire” (p. 87). Yet there existed a tension between pan-African solidarity and Christian African Americans’ paternalistic and even imperialistic perspectives. On the one hand, Hughes argues, forums like the *Mission Herald* regularly denounced Jim Crow and connected racist imperial policies in Africa to racism in the United States. On the other hand, editorials often repeated colonial discourses about uplift and praised colonial efforts in economic and religious “progress” (p. 103). Hughes’s chapter presents an inviting path for further research in a field generally dominated by studies of the African Methodist Episcopal Church or pan-African conventions like the inaugural Pan-African Congress in London, which came years after the NBC’s formation.

Lisa Davenport, Damion Thomas, and Vera Ingrid Grant also contribute to the volume’s study of African American civil society and foreign affairs. These authors delve into the realm of cultural diplomacy, illustrating how cultural emissaries such as professional athletes, soldiers, and musicians had more freedom and flexibility to voice their opinions and pursue African American interests, yet also had tenuous access to power and were at the mercy of those who did have formal access (i.e., US government officials). Davenport studies the history of “jazz diplomacy” during the Cold War, detailing the State Department’s Bureau

of Educational and Cultural Affairs (CU) and its ambivalent commitment to this program. She also uncovers the debate between US officials and jazz musicians over which type of jazz (avant-garde/free jazz versus “mainstream”) and race would best represent the United States abroad. Thomas’s chapter focuses on the complexities of black athletes as cultural ambassadors and the tensions that arose when these African Americans strayed from the proper but unwritten script. Finally, Grant looks at the practice of “race work”—racial acts like minstrelsy that “helped to redistribute the role of enemy and ally”—in post-World War I, Allied-occupied Rhineland (p. 121). She argues that race work, particularly blackface minstrelsy, not only entertained white American doughboys but also “eased the friction between Germans and doughboys” and “helped occlude actual black experiences of victory and contribution” (p. 120).

The volume’s third and final section has a more contemporary focus and draws, at times, on political science methodology. Lorenzo Morris constructs a “typology of ‘racial pressures’” that African American diplomats have contended with, applying this model to the careers of Ralph Bunche, Andrew Young, Donald McHenry, and Susan Rice (p. 178). Morris contends that only recently, with the emergence of Rice, has “the long sought invisibility of race” been brought to the African American international presence (p. 197). Ibrahim Sundiata follows with a study of Obama’s impact on US foreign relations, asking, “Has having an African American commander-in-chief shifted American foreign relations in any appreciable way?” (p. 201). Sundiata describes deteriorating relations between America and Africa, especially due to a political divergence on social and cultural issues between US Democrats and African politicians. He ironically finds that the ascension of a “son of Africa” to the US presidency “may well sound the death knell of traditional pan-Africanism” (p. 210). Charles Stith, former US ambassador to the United Republic of Tanzania, closes the volume with his epilogue, “The Impact of

African Americans on U.S. Foreign Policy.” He surveys four “*eras of impact*” that reflect the African American imprint on US foreign policy: slavery, Reconstruction, civil rights, and post-civil rights. Stith asserts that African Americans “have pushed American policy in the direction of human rights and, in particular, advanced a more progressive agenda for US foreign relations with non-Western countries” (p. 214).

The volume is strongest where it focuses most pointedly on its stated purpose. The introduction states that the book’s mission is to “contextualize and examine how the role of African American elites in crafting of American foreign policy has evolved over time from an informal and marginalized presence to one of central policy making on the global stage” (p. 1). The essays by Blakely and Stewart on early African American diplomats and intellectuals are particularly noteworthy in this endeavor. Hughes’s study of black Baptist missions also fits well into this framework. The preface and epilogue, written by former African American practitioners of US diplomacy, are also unique and fascinating perspectives on the topic.

However, some of the volume’s other chapters stray from this framework, present interesting but unfocused arguments, or overstate their scholarly interventions. Chapters in part 2 are sometimes at odds with this study of “elites in crafting of American foreign policy” (p. 1). Studies of white and black soldiers in occupied Rhineland or African American athletes abroad would fit more into the purview of a book examining non-state or non-elite actors and the influence of culture on foreign relations, like Brenda Gayle Plummer’s edited collection *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988* (2003). Some of the volume’s stated contributions and interventions are overdrawn. For instance, the editors argue that the study of African Americans serving “as formal and informal” representatives of the United States “has not yet received

sufficient scholarly attention” (p. 1). Yet Krenn, one of the authors, has already contributed excellent scholarship in this vein (*Black Diplomacy: African Americans and the State Department, 1945-1969* [1999]); and historians such as Carol Anderson (*Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941-1960* [2014]), Andrew DeRoche (*Andrew Young: Civil Rights Ambassador* [2003]), Mary Dudziak (*Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* [2000]), Gerald Horne (*Black and Brown: African-Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920* [2004]), and Plummer (*Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* [1996]) have done likewise. It is also unclear how original some of the material in the volume is, especially related to some of the authors’ previous publications. For example, Thomas’s chapter on black athletes as US cultural ambassadors begins with eight paragraphs that can be found verbatim in the introduction of his book, *Globetrotting: African American Athletes and Cold War Politics* (2012).

While on the whole the study overstates the historical gaps it addresses, and some chapters stray from the volume’s stated focus, several of this collection’s chapters and topics will certainly spur new and further research in African American and US diplomatic history. *African Americans in U.S. Foreign Policy* will particularly interest those concerned with the history and challenges faced by African Americans involved in the making and execution of US foreign policy.

Note

[1]. Blakely’s other works on Greener include “Richard T. Greener and the ‘Talented Tenth’s’ Dilemma,” *Journal of Negro History* 59 (October 1974): 305-321; “Black U.S. Consuls and Diplomats and Black Leadership 1880-1920,” *Umoja* 1 (Spring 1977): 1-16; and *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1986).

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