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"John F. Kennedy: Words Louder Than Actions in Newly-Independent Africa"

John F. Kennedy's appeals to newly-independent African nations were motivated by genuine moral compassion, yet potential to enact real change in the continent was held back by his pragmatic Cold War agenda.

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Honors in History

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Abstract

Briney, Aidan

“Words louder than Actions in Nonaligned Africa”

John F. Kennedy’s appeals to newly-independent African nations were motivated by genuine moral compassion, yet potential to enact real change in the continent was held back by his pragmatic Cold War agenda.

John F. Kennedy’s polarizing relationship with newly independent African leaders in the middle of the 20th century is one of the lesser-told stories of his career. From an early age, Kennedy developed a strong compassion for the underprivileged and oppressed. In tandem, he became staunchly pragmatic regarding political decisions. This thesis argues that Kennedy’s pragmatic Cold War agenda usually overruled his genuine moral compassion to assist newly-independent African countries. Each chapter analyzes an aspect of Kennedy’s moral approach towards building relationships with African nationalists, only to show that his fiercely pragmatic Cold War policy prevented these relationships from reaching their full potential. Ultimately, Kennedy’s words spoke louder than his actions when it came to his courting of newly-independent African nations and their leaders. His Cold War agenda dictated the final say in every decision he made, holding him back from enacting long-term change in a continent possessing tremendous potential.

This thesis consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction analyzes how certain experiences during John F. Kennedy’s upbringing instilled genuine moral compassion in him, while also considering other early experiences that made him fiercely pragmatic. Chapter 1 contrasts JFK with his predecessor, President

Dwight D. Eisenhower. Unlike Kennedy, Eisenhower paid little heed to Africa, giving Kennedy an automatic advantage in building relationships. At times, he made active attempts to avoid meeting with African nationalists. Not used to genuine attention from Western powers, African nationalists greatly appreciated Kennedy's interest in their cause.

Chapter 2 discusses Kennedy's methods of courting African nationalists. The relationships he cultivated through personal connections, welcome receptions, and charm eased the deployment of numerous aid programs to African nations. However, Kennedy's progressive approach to African countries and the potential for long-term change was stymied by contradictions from his Cold War agenda. This becomes clear upon analysis of Kennedy's policy towards South Africa and the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Guinea-Bissau. Kennedy supported white minority rule in those countries because of his Cold War agenda - Portugal was a NATO ally in possession of the Azores Air Force Base, and South Africa was a stalwart against communism in a key geographic location.

Chapter 3 is an in-depth analysis of the most famous aid program Kennedy deployed to Africa: the Peace Corps. Introduced two months into JFK's presidency, the Peace Corps fulfilled the challenge laid out in Kennedy's Inaugural Address: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." However, much like the rest of Kennedy's rhetoric on Africa, there was much positivity and theoretical growth promoted by the Peace Corps, yet few lasting changes achieved.

Chapter 4 breaks down the similarities between Kennedy's approach to courting African nationalists and his response to domestic civil rights issues. Kennedy used his success with courting African nationalists to gain support from civil rights leaders, and vice

versa. However, Kennedy's lack of response to civil rights crises and hesitancy to meet with civil rights leaders showed that, once again, he fell short of his potential to enact lasting change. Finally, the conclusion ties these four events together and references Robert F. Kennedy's 1966 speech in South Africa. This speech highlights the vision for real change Kennedy wanted to fulfill in Africa if he hadn't given precedence to his Cold War agenda.

Introduction

John F. Kennedy remains deeply ingrained in American memory and legend. He was a gifted orator who established a strong sense of trust with politicians and ordinary people alike. However, his connection with African nationalists is an often-overlooked aspect of his presidency. Despite his tragically brief time in office, Kennedy still managed to build significant relationships with newly independent African leaders. In the words of historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, "in no part of the world did Kennedy pioneer more effectively than in Africa."¹ These connections were motivated by a combination of moral and pragmatic considerations. Through personal diplomacy and charm, aid programs such as the Peace Corps, and assisted by the complete disregard of African nationalism by his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Kennedy built bridges with newly-independent African nationalists. While the morals behind this drive to assist African nationalists were later transformed into a way to push his administration's Cold War agenda, the moral drive to generate deep, personal connections with African nationalists and help the people they represented was genuine. Nonetheless, Kennedy's upbringing also gave him a fiercely pragmatic spirit. During his presidency, when faced with making a decision based on compassion or based on pragmatism, the latter always triumphed. In almost every scenario, a pragmatic decision was motivated by Kennedy's Cold War diplomacy.

Sources cited for this thesis include both primary and secondary sources. Oral interviews, letters, and quotes directly from both JFK and prominent African nationalists are instrumental to painting a picture of how Kennedy really felt about newly-independent

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: JFK in the White House* (New York: Mariner, 1965) p. 785.

African leaders, and vice versa. Many sources contain descriptions of meetings with African nationalists, followed by meetings with pragmatically-motivated advisors. As personal diplomacy played a large part in Kennedy's courting of Africans, primary sources are instrumental to understanding this process in depth.

In this thesis, "morals" are described as a significant motivation behind Kennedy's support of newly-independent African nationalists. In this case, "morals" are related to any Kennedy action stemming from a genuine emotional care about human rights, freedom, or civil rights. "Morals" could override Kennedy's political decisions, but - as this thesis argues - this rarely was the case.

Kennedy's moral compassion to help those less fortunate emerged from his heritage and childhood experiences. His family history as Irish "hardly a generation away from colonial rule" and oppression gave him a strong ground to base his support for global victims of the same ails.² The Kennedy family moved from Boston to New York partially because of job signs reading "No Irish Need Apply."³ His Catholic roots, which never dominated but remained present throughout his political career, kept him spiritually grounded.⁴ A physically frail youth, Kennedy was no stranger to fighting through numerous illnesses. Despite this shortcoming, he still insisted on playing football in high school and college, establishing a reputation for playing with the most heart of anybody on the team.

² Philip E. Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy's courting of African nationalist leaders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 235.

³ Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) p. 33.

⁴ *President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address*. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

In 1936, while a nineteen-year-old Kennedy settled into his freshman year at Harvard, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie became the first head of state to speak in front of the League of Nations. Calling for assistance against Italian fascist aggression, Selassie showed the strength of African self-determination during a time when nearly all other African nations were under colonization by Europe.⁵ Emperor Selassie's call for intervention was thwarted by Great Britain and France, but his prediction that greater disaster would result if the League failed to confront Italy was incredibly accurate.⁶ His words inspired Kwame Nkrumah, the future president of Ghana, to "dedicate his life to fighting colonialism."⁷ Though he didn't know it yet, in two decades, John F. Kennedy would meet both of these impactful African nationalists. His moral upbringing instilled a genuine moral passion to forge numerous connections with African nationalists.

Back at Harvard, Kennedy had back surgery, leaving him bedridden for months. However, during recovery periods, Kennedy maximized his time with reading and thoughtful reflection, deepening his awareness and sharpening his perspective on those less-fortunate and less-privileged. His thoughtful reading instilled a deep drive to make a personal difference in other people's lives.⁸

After graduation, Kennedy was elected to the House of Representatives, basing his campaign on support for unions, veterans, and the working class.⁹ His international

⁵ Derrick M. Nault, *Africa and the Shaping of International Human Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) p. 77.

⁶ Ibid, p. 81.

⁷ Ibid, p. 85.

⁸ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power* (New York: Vintage, 2013) p. 65

⁹ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. Congressional Campaign Files, 1946-1958. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

exposure expanded as he took a diplomatic trip to Indochina in 1951. Upon arrival, Kennedy immediately sought to avoid the 'official' narratives pushed by French colonial officials waiting for him at the airport. Instead, he made it his business to speak with as many workers and local residents as possible.¹⁰ This drive to push deeper below the surface of seemingly innocuous colonial affairs came back into play during his criticism of African colonial governance just a few years later.

Winning election to the Senate in 1953, his support for those less well-off continued. As a representative of the working-class district of West Roxbury, Massachusetts, Kennedy, in his own words, "came to see the need for social legislation very pragmatically" through conversations with residents.¹¹ Kennedy's youth and early political career made it clear that he was motivated by moral compassion. Throughout his youth and early political career, Kennedy made it clear that moral considerations encompassed a significant part of his political thought process. At this highly impressionable crossroads in Kennedy's life, another strong political character trait simultaneously emerged - pragmatism, with regards to staunch anti-communist feelings. In tandem with his morals, this pragmatism also had early roots. Rose and Joseph P. Kennedy's parental style was extremely disciplined. At the family dinner table, JFK and his eight siblings engaged in intense political discussions. One child was assigned a topic for in-depth research. The rest were given the same assignment, so they could test the first child and see how much he really knew.¹² Sibling rivalry was encouraged in sports and academics. The Kennedy parents wanted to groom their children

¹⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: JFK in the White House* (New York: Mariner, 1965) p. 788.

¹¹ JFK Museum Introduction Video, JFK Library, Dorchester, MA. Accessed November 29, 2022.

¹² Evelyn Lincoln, *My Twelve Years with John F. Kennedy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1965) p. 2.

for a life in high political office, and this was clear to all parties involved. At an early age, Joe Kennedy Jr. declared he would be president.

In tandem with this political drive, a strong pragmatic thought process developed within JFK. His senior thesis, *Why England Slept*, criticized Great Britain for their lack of preparedness in responding to Nazi Germany, with his central argument being the importance of responding quickly to any situation. As Kennedy became accustomed to life in the Massachusetts Senate, the seeds of African independence movements were beginning to take root. In Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser seized power in Egypt and sought to nationalize the country, removing all traces of British influence. In sub-Saharan Africa, Kwame Nkrumah became the first independent President of Ghana in 1957, and Sekou Touré broke away from France to become Guinea's first independent President in 1958. Kennedy used a combination of moral and pragmatic tactics to make connections with each of these leaders. Though he attempted to use morals in every situation, his pragmatism always dictated the actual action he took.

Just as Kennedy's upbringing gave him strong moral compassion for those struggling against oppression, his parents also instilled pragmatic political values within him. These opposing forces clashed during his political career, notably during his engagement with Africa. Kennedy's drive to make connections and build trust with newly-independent African nationalists were at a crossroads against his pragmatic Cold War diplomacy employed against the Soviet Union. As this thesis will prove, in every case in which Kennedy's morals were pitted against his Cold War pragmatism, pragmatism triumphed.

Chapter 1: JFK's Upbringing and Early Support of African Nationalism

This chapter continues the chronological overview of JFK's continual pursuit of relationships with African nationalists as he rises from a member of the House of Representatives to Senator. Late in Eisenhower's presidency, his failure to recognize the importance of African independence continued. Meanwhile, Kennedy made attempts to court African nationalists, including going out of his way to meet them during State visits, comparing African independence with the American Revolution, and providing a sizable donation from the Kennedy Foundation to fund the Kenya Student Airlift.

In the late 1950s, as Kennedy matured into his role as a Massachusetts Senator, several African countries were in the middle of a transition of power. Nationalists gained prominence and rose to lead their countries. Gamal Abdel Nasser became President of Egypt in 1954, rising to be one of the most popular leaders in Africa and the Middle East. In 1957, Ghana became the first African country to gain independence from Britain, and its outspoken President Kwame Nkrumah quickly became a prominent figure in both Eastern and Western fields of view. Sekou Touré led a nationalist independence campaign in Guinea, becoming President of his newly-independent nation in 1958. Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie visited the United States in 1954 and approved a new Constitution in 1955 - as Emperor of Ethiopia since 1931, he remained a stalworth of nationalism in Africa and a symbol for civil rights in America. Finally, Kenyan nationalist Tom Mboya embarked on a tour of the United States as his Kenya African Union vied for independence from Great Britain. Gaining attention in the US, he appeared on *Meet the Press* and met several prominent politicians.

Despite the advent of African nationalists calling for independence across the continent, the Eisenhower administration (1953-1961) made little effort to build relationships with African nationalists. The primary driver of their inaction was a fear of upsetting NATO alliances. Eisenhower's African policy was "an extension of the Marshall Plan," placing great emphasis on the necessity of Western Europe's access to African resources as they recovered from World War II.¹³ With this increasingly-outdated military strategy in mind, Eisenhower refused to entertain any notion that might compromise NATO relations, subsequently leading to Soviet progress in the Cold War. Colonialism was accepted, viewed only as an issue that could damage relations with NATO allies.¹⁴ His approach to the subject was so old-fashioned that one critic dubbed President Eisenhower "more royalist than the Queen" on the subject of African independence. Such sentiment was repeatedly apparent throughout Eisenhower's administration. Eisenhower supported France's use of violence in Algeria.¹⁵ During Guinea's struggle to achieve independence from France, Eisenhower did not respond to President Sekou Touré's request for aid, despite the fact that France adopted a "scorched-earth" policy during their colonial withdrawal from the country. After Guinea achieved independence in October 1958, Eisenhower did not acknowledge their achievement. Despite multiple letters from President Touré, Eisenhower refused to recognize independent Guinea until eight months after the Soviet Union.¹⁶ As a result, President Touré turned to the Soviets for economic,

¹³ Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 4.

¹⁵ Phillip E. Muehlenbeck, *Kennedy and Touré: A Success in Personal Diplomacy*, IN: *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 19: 69-95. (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2008) p. 72.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 73.

military, and moral support.¹⁷ A cordial relationship with Touré remained nonexistent for the duration of Eisenhower's presidency.

When voting on the United Nations Anti-Colonial Resolution of 1960, Eisenhower again showed where his allegiance lay. Though the US was expected to vote in favor of the resolution, the decision escalated to Eisenhower, eventually resulting in an abstinence vote. An official reason was "difficulties in language and thought," but the true reason for the abstinence was pressure from the United Kingdom, who took the resolution as a personal attack on their colonial empire.¹⁸ Further, Eisenhower met with few Africans during his presidency, often opting to go on golfing trips when African nationalists were scheduled to visit Washington.¹⁹ A meeting with Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah was short, and Eisenhower appeared disinterested in what the leader of the first African nation to attain independence from a colonial power had to say. In similar fashion, Eisenhower did not discuss economic assistance in a meeting with Guinean President Sekou Touré, despite the French destruction dealt to Touré's country.²⁰ At Ghana's independence ceremony in 1957, Vice President Richard Nixon asked a group of black journalists whom he mistook for Ghanaians "What's it feel like to be free?" only to be met with "We don't know, we are from Alabama."²¹ Meeting with Togo President Sylvanus Olympio, Eisenhower declared "the reason the US shared one ambassador between Togo and Cameroon was because he did

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 74.

¹⁸ Wayne Morse, *The United States in the United Nations, 1960 - A Turning Point* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961) p. 19–24.

¹⁹ Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans*, p. 15.

²⁰ Muehlenbeck, *Kennedy and Touré: A Success in Personal Diplomacy*, p. 74.

²¹ David Rooney, *Kwame Nkrumah: Vision and Tragedy* (New York: African Books Collective, 2007) p. 188.

not want his diplomats to “have to live in tents.”²² In private, Eisenhower labeled African independence “a destructive hurricane” and wished that Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba would “fall into a river full of crocodiles.”²³ Moving beyond wishful thinking, he ordered the CIA to assassinate Lumumba.²⁴ News of Lumumba’s death became public three days into Kennedy’s administration, and the new President was left to rebuild shattered trust left in Eisenhower’s wake.

Actions by the State Department mirrored President Eisenhower's disinterest in building relationships with African nationalists. African diplomacy was handled as a subsidiary of the Middle East Bureau until the 1957 creation of the Bureau of African Affairs.²⁵ The CIA did not have an Africa Division until 1959. A 1953 report on the “Decline in United States Prestige Abroad” ignored the perception of Africans completely.²⁶ During a state visit by Guinean President Sekou Touré, flags of Ghana mistakenly lined a New York City parade route.²⁷ Eisenhower’s administration did offer support to African nations, but this support was often rebuffed if a country’s leader expressed nonaligned views. When Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser requested financing for construction of the Aswan Dam, the State Department agreed to provide funding. However, when Nasser recognized the People’s Republic of China in 1956, the US abruptly broke off negotiations. In the words of CIA Director Alan Dulles, “we do not want to give such aid if it merely supports

²² Ade Daramy, *John F Kennedy: When the US president met Africa's independence heroes* (BBC News, Article. 27 February 2021.)

²³ Jim Newton, *Eisenhower: The White House Years* (New York: Doubleday, 2011.)

²⁴ Lawrence Devlin, *Chief of Station, Congo: Fighting the Cold War in a Hot Zone* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008) p. 95.

²⁵ Devlin, *Chief of Station, Congo: Fighting the Cold War in a Hot Zone*, p. 33.

²⁶ Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans*, p. 4.

²⁷ “African President Visits the South”, *Ebony Magazine*, February 1960.

governments which are subservient or sympathetic to international communism."²⁸ These actions showed that the Eisenhower administration was entirely concerned with limiting any possible communist gains in Africa. With this tunnel vision, however, they failed to recognize the potential benefits of making connections with nonaligned leaders.

Unlike his successor, Eisenhower was entirely motivated by Cold War diplomacy - there were no moral considerations to complicate his decision-making process. Nonetheless, he failed to recognize the benefits of creating relationships with emerging African nationalists. As a World War II hero, General Eisenhower catered to the alliances he was most familiar with - chiefly, NATO allies and those with clear loyalty to United States interests. This continued even as the "wind of change"²⁹ swept across Africa and replaced European colonial governments with independent African governments. Due to living in the past, Eisenhower failed to see the strategic value of making alliances with newly independent African nationalists.

As Eisenhower became president in a landslide 1952 election, John F. Kennedy was elected to the Massachusetts Senate. Kennedy's supreme oration skills were displayed to an ever-growing audience. Before long, Kennedy began to speak out in favor of African nationalism. In 1957, Senator Kennedy spoke out in favor of Algerian independence, proclaiming that "the most powerful single force in the world today is neither Communism nor Capitalism, neither the H-bomb nor the guided missile - it is man's eternal desire to be free and independent."³⁰ The speech made waves - domestically it was perceived as overly

²⁸ Richard D. Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) p. 18.

²⁹ Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, *The Wind of Change Speech*, 3 Feb. 1960.

³⁰ Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans*, p. 36.

critical of Portugal, who were both colonizers of Algeria and NATO allies of the United States. However, African nationalists took significant notice of the speech - Kennedy became the man in Washington for African diplomats to meet.³¹ Following his speech on Algeria, he was named chair of a new Foreign Relations subcommittee on Africa.³² Another impact of the speech was his consultation on books advocating for African independence and self-determination. Lorna Hahn's book, "North Africa, Nationalism to Nationhood" featured an introduction by Kennedy, in which he proclaimed the Algerian independence struggle as "not a self-contained drama." In contrast to previous American foreign policy towards Africa, which had "drained constructive energies and unities in the West," efforts should be directed towards creating relationships with African nationalists.³³ In recognizing that African Nationalism could not be ignored, Kennedy understood the necessity of diplomatic relationships with African nations. As the "royalist" mindset of the Eisenhower Administration and former European colonial powers became obsolete, Kennedy continued to position himself to build relationships with soon-to-be African leaders.

The biggest way JFK advocated for African independence was speeches. Due to the controversy garnered by his Algerian independence speech, he framed future speeches in favor of African independence by appealing to patriotism. This patriotism mainly took the form of either a staunch Cold War agenda or allusions to the American Revolution. In front of the American Society of African Culture, he compared the independence efforts of

³¹ Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans*, p. 36.

³² Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power*, p. 103.

³³ Lorna Hahn, *North Africa: Nationalism to Nationhood* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1960), p. 1.

African people to George Washington and the American Revolution. In a 1960 speech at St. Anselm College, he called for Americans to “welcome the bloodless revolution” occurring across Africa.³⁴ In another 1960 university speech, he called for Americans to recognize the true potential of Africa, beyond popular myth: “Call it nationalism, call it anti-colonialism, call it what you will, Africa is going through a revolution.”³⁵ A 1960 speech to the National Council of Women continued the American Revolution and Cold War references: “Tom Paine wrote that a flame has arisen, not to be extinguished. Today, that same flame of freedom burns brightly across [Africa].” Kennedy continued: “There can be no question about the determination of Africans... The only real question is whether these nations will look east or west, to Moscow or to Washington.”³⁶ The same speech further tied the American Revolution to the Cold War, proclaiming that the African National Congress in Rhodesia was threatening “a Boston Tea Party, not a Bolshevik bomb,” and that Kenyan Nationalist Tom Mboya “invokes the American Dream, not the Communist Manifesto.”³⁷

These speeches were revolutionary in their own right; no major American politician had previously been so outspoken in favor of African independence and self-determination. Whereas his famous Algeria speech was rooted in the justice of attaining independence for African peoples, later speeches downplayed moral motivations behind assisting African nations. Instead, post-1959 speeches emphasized patriotism,

³⁴ *Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at Saint Anselm's College*, Manchester, New Hampshire, March 5, 1960. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

³⁵ *Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at Student Convocation*, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, February 12, 1960. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

³⁶ *Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy to the National Council of Women*, New York, New York, October 12, 1960. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA

³⁷ Ibid

including allusions to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and other memories of the American Revolution. Such speeches also mentioned the current patriotic call to arms - competition with the Soviet Union. Framing relationship building with African nationalists as key to American strategic interests allowed Kennedy to avoid backlash similar to what he received after his Algeria speech. Downplaying criticism of NATO allies and downplaying his ever-present moral quandary with colonialism encompassed Kennedy's strategy going forward.

In speaking out for the independence of African countries, Kennedy was partly driven by his morals, but he mostly recognized the strategic importance of building relationships with newly independent African nations. World War II fundamentally changed the world's attitude towards self-governance and human rights. Motivated groups of Africans unified in the pursuit of independence. Whereas colonialism and empire-building were the focus of the first half of the twentieth century, Kennedy recognized that nationalism was the "central reality of his age."³⁸ Armed with this knowledge, Kennedy attempted to build significant connections with African nationalists.

As a Senator, Kennedy began arranging meetings with Africans visiting the United States. He went out of his way to appear welcoming, accessible and knowledgeable of issues facing African countries. In 1959, hearing that Guinean President Sekou Touré was visiting the US, Kennedy hired a helicopter to meet the President. Their meeting at Disneyland was highly publicized, with Touré congratulating Kennedy on his support of

³⁸ Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, p. 248.

Algeria.³⁹ The Guinean President and his ambassadors were “not more enthusiastic in their reactions to any American than they were to Kennedy”, praising his knowledge of world affairs and of the problems of developing countries.⁴⁰ They were also impressed by “his youth, his courage, his astonishing knowledge of world affairs in general, and of the problems of developing countries in particular.”⁴¹ No American politician went so far out of his way to meet a visiting African nationalist before. Kennedy showed his genuine interest in issues facing Guinea, and understood the immense benefits to building a relationship with the leader of the second African country to gain independence. Following his meeting with Touré, Kennedy’s efforts to court African nationalists continued, making up a significant part of his presidential campaign.⁴²

Later in 1959, perhaps the most famous connection between JFK and African nationalism emerged. Seeking support for a student scholarship program, Kenyan politician Tom Mboya embarked on a speaking tour of the United States. Mboya was a member of the Kenya African Union (KAU), the most prominent nationalist group in Kenya. Since the arbitrary division of Africa at the 1884 Berlin conference, Kenya had been under British colonial rule. The colonial government appropriated land for white settlers, imposed unjust policies upon Africans, and reshaped society to fit their own aspirations. Authority was enforced on Africans through psychological control and iron-fist rule.⁴³

³⁹ Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, p. 30.

⁴⁰ Robert B. Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* (Boston: Cambridge University, 2012) p. 83.

⁴¹ Phillip E. Muehlenbeck, “Kennedy and Touré: A Success in Personal Diplomacy.” In *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 19: 69-95. (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2008) p. 75.

⁴² Ibid, p. 76.

⁴³ Aidan Briney, *Comparing the Colonial and Post-Independence Governments of Kenya, with Analysis of How Both Governments Attempt to Build a Sense of Nationhood*, Union College, 14 September 2022.

The psychological aspect included the attempted construction of a British-Kenyan nation-state via flags, monuments, street names, statues, and rewards for loyalty to the crown. Many Africans were convinced that their best option was compliance with the arbitrary restrictions imposed upon them by the colonial government. For those who exhibited resistance, a police force and strong barriers between Europeans and Africans kept them in line. The Kipande system required every African working in cities - such as Nairobi and Mombasa - to wear a box around their neck. Said box contained the individual's name, place of birth, and employer. All British colonizers were granted magisterial powers over Africans, including the ability to sentence an African to death at a moment's notice.⁴⁴

British control of Kenya remained strong until World War II. At the war's conclusion, the global perspective on human rights shifted dramatically. Human rights were one of the core founding principles of the United Nations. In addition, Africans who fought in the war returned to their homelands with broadened horizons. African veterans demanded that their lives be held to the same socioeconomic standards they witnessed while fighting in Europe.⁴⁵

This veteran's movement culminated in the so-called Mau Mau Revolution, which consisted of guerilla warfare led by African World War II veterans and everyday Kenyans. In declaring a State of Emergency, the colonial government had a pretext to detain, kill or seize land from anyone who opposed the crown. Over 11,000 Africans were killed during

⁴⁴ Godfrey Sang, Lecture, 10 February 2022.

⁴⁵ Hal Brands, *Wartime Recruiting Practices, Martial Identity, and Post-World War II Demobilization in Colonial Kenya*. (JSTOR: The Journal of African History, vol. 46, no. 1, 2005) p. 103-125.

the eight-year emergency, in contrast to a handful of British colonizers.⁴⁶ With the conclusion of the Emergency in 1960, internal pressure, independence of surrounding African countries, and United Nations calls for liberation made independence inevitable.⁴⁷ During this period, a different independence movement emerged in Kenya. In contrast to the guerrilla warfare, for-the-people effort of the Mau Mau counterrevolutionaries, the Kenya African Union (KAU) sought to consolidate power into the hands of a small group of elite, mostly Western-educated Africans. Many members of the KAU originally worked for the colonial government, and now found themselves in position to assume power with few changes to the structure of the colonial government. In conferences between the Kenya African Union (now rebranded to Kenya African National Union) and British colonial officials, terms for independence were discussed without the presence of Mau Mau revolutionaries. Despite being the primary drivers behind the independence movement, the Mau Mau found themselves on the outside looking in. They stood to gain practically nothing from independence.⁴⁸

In the midst of these independence conferences, Kennedy made his entrance with the intention of building bridges with Mboya and the rest of his Kenya African National Union (KANU) compatriots. He did so partially because of the morals driving him to assist a group of people advocating tirelessly for their independence, but also because he recognized the political benefits that could be obtained from partnering with an

⁴⁶ Godfrey Sang, Oral Interview, 21 May 2022.

⁴⁷ Aidan Briney, *Comparing the Colonial and Post-Independence Governments of Kenya, with Analysis of How Both Governments Attempt to Build a Sense of Nationhood*, Union College, 14 September 2022.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

easily-malleable government inheriting British practices and economic structures almost entirely intact. Truly, the up-and-coming nationalists set to inherit power from British colonial officials did not intend to make significant changes to Kenya's distribution of wealth, foreign relations, or governmental structure. Thus, both Kennedy and Mboya realized the potential a working relationship possessed.

Tom Mboya and KANU represented the "bloodless revolution" that Kennedy mentioned in his speech to St. Anselm students. Though he cared about Mboya's struggle for independence, the moral quandary alone was not enough for him to act. The conditions had to be correct, with clear opportunities for political and Cold War benefits. Once the conditions for a "bloodless revolution" were met, Kennedy stepped in and formed a connection with the newly-independent government. In Kenya, the independent government closely resembled the colonial government, easing connections between Kennedy and the newly-instated government.

As President, Kennedy's official State Department Guidelines of US Policy and Operations Concerning Africa" echoed this sentiment of forming connections with African nation-states that were structured in a similar manner as their colonial predecessors. The State Department guidelines delegated that the goal in assisting newly-independent nationalists, in their quest to form a centralized government, was to "supply some military training and equipment so as to exert influence on the potential [African] leadership groups... and at the same time stimulate African initiatives looking towards voluntary

limitations on armaments.”⁴⁹ Such contradictory policy was designed to give the appearance of freewill to African nationalists about to gain power, so that Kennedy could make as strong a connection as possible. Once in power, leaders were grateful for the assistance provided by the US, and listened to their calls to “deflect the military programs into nation-building activities, making a reality of the slogan “bulldozers instead of tanks.”⁵⁰ The bulldozers, of course, referred to the development and globalization that could be attained through African partnership with Western corporations and development programs. Though Kennedy positioned himself as pursuing these connections purely out of the goodness of his heart, the reality was far more complex.

Clearly, JFK’s angle was more complicated than just helping African nationalists attain independence for the good of their people. In each African country that JFK built relations with, the transition of power between colonial and post-independence governments had to be peaceful. Newly independent leaders had to hold similar economic values as their colonial predecessors (though they could be nonaligned in regards to supporting NATO or Warsaw). Finally, African nationalists had to be open to forging connections with Kennedy and provide political favors, in line with Kennedy’s Cold War agenda, in return for US support. These unspoken terms were solidified during the first year of Kennedy’s presidency. At this point in 1959, JFK moved forward towards building a relationship with KANU nationalist Tom Mboya.

⁴⁹ “*Guidelines of US Policy and Operations Concerning Africa*”, for McGeorge Bundy’s Tuesday Group Luncheon. Folder: Africa, General, 9/22/61. Box 2: Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries.)

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Seeing an opportunity to not only help an African nationalist attain independence, but a partnership that paid dividends after independence, a meeting between Kennedy and Mboya was arranged. The details were organized by the American Committee on Africa, which also arranged Mboya's visit to the US. During his month-long tour, Mboya gave numerous speeches advocating for both African independence and African-American civil rights. In Los Angeles he and Kennedy met, striking a rapport immediately. Mboya was "most impressed with [Kennedy] as a person... his sincerity and his 'popular appeal' to an audience."⁵¹ Very much used to being ignored by the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy's charm had great effect on Mboya.

Besides giving speeches to spread awareness of Kenya's campaign for independence, one of the Kenyan nationalist's primary goals in his visit was to arrange funding for a Student Airlift. This airlift provided an opportunity for Kenyan students to attend university in the United States, returning to contribute to the soon-to-be independent nation's economy. In need of a \$100,000 grant, fundraising hit a roadblock, in the form of the Eisenhower administration's lack of attention towards African issues. Congress refused to provide the money. Learning of the conundrum, JFK flew Mboya to the Kennedy Compound in Hyannis, Cape Cod for further discussion. There, he discussed terms to donate the \$100,000 via the Kennedy Foundation.

Hearing of the developments, the Eisenhower administration quickly reversed course. Suddenly offering the \$100,000, Vice President Nixon employed Senator Hugh Scott to run a smear campaign against the Kennedy Foundation's donation. Charging that the

⁵¹ *Thomas J. Mboya Oral History Interview* – JFK#1, 10 March 1965. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

State Department had always been willing to offer the \$100,000, Scott declared that Kennedy “outbid” the State Department for “blatant political purposes.”⁵² Kennedy’s rebuttal was swift. Calling the allegations “the most unfair, distorted and maligned attack I have heard in 14 years in politics,” he explained how the Kennedy Foundation arrived at the donation: “Mr. Mboya came to us and asked for help... We felt something ought to be done... To disappoint 250 students who hoped to come to this country, it certainly seemed to me, would be most unfortunate, and so we went ahead.”⁵³ Domestic support quickly aligned itself with Kennedy.

The incident not only gave Kennedy a political boost against Nixon - his rival presidential candidate in the 1960 election - but also established a close connection between Kennedy and Mboya. Tom Mboya was grateful for Senator Kennedy’s help in funding the program, and the two maintained this connection for the rest of their lives. Kennedy realized that funding the airlift was an extension of building bridges with African nationalists. Inviting future leaders and business professionals to study in the United States expanded the world of these students, while opening the US to relations with Kenya. Kennedy also received Cold War credit for tilting a newly independent nation towards the United States and away from the Soviet Union.

With funding from the Kennedy Foundation in place, Tom Mboya and the American Committee on Africa moved forward with their opportunity program. The Kenya Student Airlift was a great success, sending hundreds of students to universities across the US.

⁵² Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, p. 31.

⁵³ Tom Shachtman, *Airlift to America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009.)

Barack Obama Sr. and countless others were inspired to continue their education by the airlift. Environmentalist and future Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai studied in the US thanks to the program. Like Tom Mboya, she appreciated the attention and genuine concern that Kennedy brought to the Airlift: "I admired him as a leader... Through the Kennedy Airlift I became part of his dream."⁵⁴ As the airlift program continued after Kennedy became president, other young Kenyans studying in the US were afforded the opportunity to meet JFK. Mboya recounted that they were "most impressed by his charm and simple manner and very human approach." Especially compared to the Eisenhower administration, the airlift students "felt there was a definite change in the attitude towards foreign students as far as the State Department was concerned" ... "there was a greater understanding of social problems too."⁵⁵ Kennedy's energy and optimism provided a spark within the students, giving them hope for the future as they embarked on a daunting yet exciting chapter in their lives. Both Tom Mboya - a statesman with much experience dealing with foreign politicians - and ordinary students alike could tell that Kennedy cared about providing this opportunity for them. Kennedy's ability to form a heartfelt connection with people from a country completely foreign to most American politicians represented a breath of fresh air for Kenyans.

Despite the fact that John F. Kennedy was only a Senator, his understanding of African issues, his concern for said issues, and the efforts he took to build relationships with African leaders were groundbreaking. Kennedy helped to change the American

⁵⁴ Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004) p. 92.

⁵⁵ *Thomas J. Mboya Oral History Interview* – JFK#1, 10 March 1965. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

perception of Africa, from that of a backwards third-world continent, to a diverse group of countries all hungry to partake in global development and trade. In addition, the trust he built with nationalists such as Guinea's Sekou Touré and Kenya's Tom Mboya gave him a positive reputation in most of Africa. In African nations close to attaining independence, optimism for the future heightened. Though JFK set the precedent for connecting with African nationalists as a Senator, his work was only beginning. Defeating incumbent Vice President Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential election - the man who refused to provide funding for the Kenya Airlift only months before - JFK further increased his attention towards Africa as president.

Chapter 2: Foreign Relations with African Nationalists

President John F. Kennedy's courting of African nationalists was motivated by a combination of moral and pragmatic considerations. Kennedy possessed compassion for the people living in newly-independent African nations. At the same time, he possessed a staunch Cold War agenda. Even in the most morally questionable situations, Cold War pragmatism in favor of US interests triumphed. As President, John F. Kennedy was motivated by a duality of moral and pragmatic ambitions. JFK successfully used appeals to newly-independent African leaders, as he redefined the negative Western perception of Africa set by NATO-minded leaders, built trust with African nationalists through charming personal diplomacy, and deployed numerous aid programs. However, all his moral appeals were overshadowed by pragmatic actions stemming from his Cold War agenda, including a willful ignorance of Apartheid South Africa, no response to Portuguese human rights violations in Guinea Bissau and Angola, and aid programs that failed to live up to their true potential.

Muehlenbeck's *Courting the Africans*, Rakove's *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World*, and Mahoney's *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* are three preeminent books on Kennedy's involvement in Africa. Of the three, Mahoney's includes the most in-depth collection of personal quotes from Kennedy himself. This gives us the best view of what JFK was truly aiming to accomplish in the continent, and how deep he intended to make the relationships he cultivated with numerous African leaders. However, none of these three works analyzes how Kennedy's Cold War agenda limited him from making real change. Rather, their collective objective is simply to show the open-mindedness, ceremony, and

charm that allowed Kennedy to build bridges with African nationalists. The impact of those relationships is not a primary focus of their analysis.

President Dwight Eisenhower embodied the last generation of leaders who viewed Africa as a backwards continent unfit for self-rule. As early as 1936, Emperor Haile Selassie experienced jeers from Italian diplomats while speaking at the League of Nations.⁵⁶ The attitude towards African diplomats and nationalists on an international stage had not improved much since. Western diplomats employed seemingly progressive language towards African politicians, that in actuality sought to deny Africans rights. In particular, the sentiment that Africans' "right to decide" had to follow their "ability to decide," despite that there were no details on how to achieve said "ability".⁵⁷

Eisenhower did not directly contribute to this oppression, but did not attempt to change the status quo either. His golfing trips during visits by African nationalists, refusal to back UN legislation calling for the end of colonialism, and inability to differentiate communism from African nationalism led to a disconnect between the President and up-and-coming African countries. JFK sought to change the perception of African nationalists and leaders on an international stage. His 1957 speech on Algeria gave a burst of hope that connections between African nationalism and Western interests were possible.

After changing the culture surrounding Western communications with Africa, Kennedy ramped up his building of relationships with newly-independent African leaders.

⁵⁶ Nault, *Africa and the Shaping of International Human Rights*, p. 81.

⁵⁷ Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days*, p. 907.

The fact that the Eisenhower administration had almost completely ignored newly independent African leaders only made Kennedy's goal of forging new relationships easier. Used to being ignored by foreign affairs officials and international correspondence alike, African leaders relished the increased attention to their issues.

JFK put significant effort into making connections with African nationalists-turned-leaders. In the words of an American Foreign Service officer, African nationalist leaders "reminded JFK of our own founding fathers." Kennedy's love of history, combined with his own personal connection to the Irish independence struggle, led to a genuine drive to make connections as deep and welcoming as possible. Less than a month after his inauguration, Kennedy assigned G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams to be his Assistant Secretary of African Affairs.⁵⁸ In addition, men experienced with African affairs, histories and languages, such as William Atwood, replaced Eisenhower's old guard in the State Department.⁵⁹ As Williams traveled throughout Africa and made connections with diplomats from various countries, Kennedy focused on domestic receptions for African leaders.

Lavish Washington visits were arranged, and State tours were carefully planned. The President and First Lady of Ivory Coast, Felix and Marie Houphouët-Boigny, were given a welcome speech by Kennedy at the airport. After a diplomatic meeting, the Kennedys welcomed the Houphouët-Boignys for a Camelot dinner reception. Dubbed "Africa's Jackie" by American media, Marie Houphouët-Boigny sent shockwaves around the country with

⁵⁸ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 27.

⁵⁹ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 10.

her beauty and grace.⁶⁰ Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie expected to be treated like royalty during his State Visit, and was not disappointed.⁶¹ In “one of the warmest greetings ever given a visiting Head of State”, Kennedy gave the Emperor a red-carpet reception and parade through DC, before a private train transported him to New York for a UN speech and ticker-tape parade full of cheering New Yorkers.⁶²

After a long war with France, Algeria finally achieved independence. The FLN, led by Ahmed Ben Bella, defeated France in an eight-year war beset with human rights violations. In 1964, France and Algeria signed the Evian Accords, which officially withdrew French colonizers.⁶³ Wanting to recognize the groundbreaking 1957 speech Kennedy had made in support of his country, newly anointed Head of Government Ahmed Ben Bella visited the President in Washington. Bella was a self-described “Nasserist”, which led to Kennedy’s efforts to show his acceptance of nonalignment. Their cordial meeting followed by a twenty-one-gun salute and a conference in the Rose Garden.⁶⁴

In each encounter, Kennedy’s charm assisted in strengthening each relationship. Kennedy routinely met with leaders past their allotted time slot, often introducing them to his family.⁶⁵ The President carefully studied the issues facing each leader’s country, and displayed a genuine interest in working with each leader towards a solution. After meeting with JFK, leaders left with “a conviction that Kennedy’s America, even if it could not do

⁶⁰ “Glamorous First Ladies” *Ebony Magazine*, August 1962.

⁶¹ See Appendix, Footnote 58.

⁶² Derrick M. Nault, *Africa and the Shaping of International Human Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) p. 91.

⁶³ Matthew James Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 263.

⁶⁴ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 170.

⁶⁵ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 72.

everything at once, was basically with them.”⁶⁶ This effect was profound. “Sparks” flew between Kennedy and African leaders, a rare occurrence in African-Western diplomatic meetings to that point. Guinean President Sekou Touré repeatedly invited Kennedy to visit his country. Malian President Modibo Keita was impressed with Kennedy after a frank, yet respectful discussion of colonial issues.⁶⁷

Understanding the value of consistent attention to issues, detailed letters were exchanged with leaders. Hearing that Egypt’s Gamal Abdel-Nasser was fond of sending letters, Kennedy began communicating with him. Nasser appreciated the gesture and courtesy between the two immensely impactful leaders emerged.⁶⁸ In addition, gifts were exchanged with African leaders. Sudanese Prime Minister El Ferik Ibrahim Abboud cherished the hunting rifle Kennedy gave him, and hoped that Kennedy would go on safari with him. Haile Selassie gifted Kennedy a handsome sculpture of the Lion of Judah, a symbol representing the Emperor of Ethiopia. In the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis, hearing that Chad President François Tombalbaye did not know where Cuba was, Kennedy sent him a *National Geographic* Atlas.⁶⁹ Understanding the value of personal diplomacy, JFK put strong, genuine effort into building bridges with African leaders through a variety of tactics. Nearly all these leaders recognized and greatly appreciated his warm outreach. Armed with stronger connections to African leaders and better understanding of African issues, Kennedy deployed several aid and development programs to the continent.

⁶⁶ Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days*, p. 899.

⁶⁷ Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World*, p. 84.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 85.

⁶⁹ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 221.

Not only did personal connections make it easier to deploy aid and development programs to African countries, but these programs served as a representation of Kennedy's moral compassion for underprivileged individuals. People across Africa saw him as personally responsible for aid programs and developed their own connection with JFK. The deployment of USAid, Food for Peace, Project Eagle, and the preservation of the Abu Simbel Temples were all examples of aid projects whose implementation was greatly eased by JFK's use of personal diplomacy.

JFK founded USAid on November 1, 1961, representing the President's attempt to bring several development assistance programs under one umbrella. Subsequently, aid and development funding for African nations increased. While the Peace Corps were the most visible promoters of American foreign policy through aid, Food for Peace was the "great unseen weapon" of Kennedy's assistance to the third world.⁷⁰ A program started during the Eisenhower administration but revitalized by Kennedy, Food for Peace, also known as Public Law 480, distributed food assistance in accordance with need. Under Kennedy, the program increased activities across Africa. In 1963, Ethiopia received \$130 million in US economic aid, a substantial amount of which was distributed from Food for Peace.⁷¹ Spurred in part by Kennedy and Nasser's continuing exchange of letters, Egypt was offered a three-year Food for Peace agreement in 1962, receiving \$431 million in US

⁷⁰ Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days*, p. 975.

⁷¹ "President's Briefing Memo: Visit of the Emperor of Ethiopia". *Folder*: Ethiopia, Haile Selassie's Visit, 10/63, Briefing Book, Index and Parts I-III. *Box 69A*: Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries.)

surplus grain at concession prices. Nasser was grateful for this boost to the Egyptian economy.⁷²

One unique program created by Kennedy's administration was Project Eagle. Launched in 1962, this program had the goal of ensuring "independent nations [are] properly oriented toward Free World ideals of Democracy and Liberty" by providing funding for the training, operation, and maintenance of aviation programs. Essentially, the program was designed to counter Soviet progress on funding of the same task. Nonetheless, the project had success in developing the aviation industries of several countries, especially in Ghana and Guinea, while also nudging those countries towards buying Western aircraft.⁷³

Finally, the preservation of the ancient temples at Abu Simbel was one of the largest morally-motivated international endeavors undertaken by Kennedy. Though Kennedy and Nasser's cordial exchange of letters played some role in the project, the credit for saving Abu Simbel is owed to Jackie Kennedy and her intervention in the matter. Learning of the campaign to save Abu Simbel from flooding caused by construction of the Aswan Dam, she wrote to her husband, asking him to personally intervene and save the 13th century BC temple.⁷⁴ Kennedy took up the task, appearing in Congress and acknowledging Nasser's call to "keep alive monuments which are not only dear to our hearts, but dear to the whole world, which believes that the ancient and new components of human culture should blend in one harmonious whole." To hoist the statues 200 feet above their existing location along

⁷² Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World*, p. 89.

⁷³ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 213.

⁷⁴ Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis Personal Papers. Textual Materials. Nancy Tuckerman Files. Subject Files: Abu Simbel and Temple of Dendur. JFK Presidential Library, Dorchester, MA.

the Nile was estimated to cost \$32 million, with the United States contributing \$10 million. Interestingly, when funding was secured, the entire amount was transferred using US owned Egyptian currency generated via Food for Peace.⁷⁵ Kennedy declared his actions were part of an effort to “channel [the force of Arab Nationalism] along constructive lines.” Despite the fact that US funding of the Aswan Dam had fallen through following the Suez Canal Crisis, Kennedy understood the advantages Egypt possessed if they remained non-aligned. He accepted that Egypt could not ally themselves with the US outright, but recognized that opportunities for cordial relations and socioeconomic progress were still possible. The preservation of Abu Simbel represented a massive effort on Kennedy’s part to morally assist a nation in need, regardless of political alignment. To show gratitude for JFK and Jackie’s contribution, Nasser donated a statue from 2400 BC to Jackie. Years later, he donated the Temple of Dendur to the State Department, which eventually came to reside in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁷⁶

The Volta River Project was part of Kennedy’s undertaking to win Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah back from his increasingly pro-communist political position. Kennedy’s moral appeals were successful in convincing Nkrumah to support some elements of American foreign policy, which made funding for the Volta River Dam project possible.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Museum Exhibit, JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

⁷⁷ Stephan Mierscher, *Nkrumah’s Baby: The Akosombo Dam and the dream of development in Ghana* (University of California, Santa Barbara, 2014) p. 357.

Relations between Kennedy and Nkrumah were damaged from the very beginning of JFK's presidency. Nkrumah was a strong supporter of Congolese Leader Patrice Lumumba, who was in a supremely difficult position. Lumumba was attempting to lead the Congo through a civil war, complicated by Belgian meddling, an army mutiny, and competing Soviet and American agents.⁷⁸ As President of the first African nation to attain independence, Nkrumah had firsthand experience with the Eisenhower administration's hatred of Lumumba and general disregard for African nationalism as a whole. Following Kennedy's election, Nkrumah played upon JFK's 1957 support of Algerian independence in order to convince him to save Lumumba from certain doom. However, President-elect Kennedy refused to take action, instead proposing to Nkrumah his "Kennedy Plan" that encouraged the Congolese - with thus-far absent help from the United Nations - to take the lead in resolving their own crisis.⁷⁹ This plan was ill-received by Nkrumah, but the worst was yet to come. Just three days after Kennedy's inauguration, he received news of Lumumba's brutal death. Photographer Jacques Lowe captured the moment in the Oval Office,⁸⁰ later reflecting that Kennedy was "heartbroken" to hear of Lumumba's death.⁸¹ Though he had pragmatically refused to help Lumumba, Kennedy was still devastated by the news of the Congolese leader's death. Nkrumah was also devastated by the news, casting blame on Kennedy, the United Nations and Western Europe. Thus, newly-inaugurated President Kennedy found himself in a difficult position. As a powerful influence in a continent with an

⁷⁸ Devlin, *Chief of Station*, p. 260.

⁷⁹ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 213.

⁸⁰ SEE APPENDIX 112: KENNEDY LEARNS OF LUMUMBA'S DEATH.

⁸¹ Jacques Lowe, *Kennedy: A Time Remembered* (New York: Quartet Books, 1983.)

ever-growing number of independent countries, Nkrumah was an essential part of Kennedy's quest to build bridges with African nationalists.

Kennedy used personal diplomacy to win back Nkrumah's support, culminating in funding for Ghana's Volta River Project. Following Lumumba's death, Kennedy set about inviting Nkrumah to the White House by any means necessary. On March 8, 1961, two months after Lumumba's death, Nkrumah arrived in Washington for a meeting with Kennedy. Kennedy met Nkrumah at the airport in person, and made welcoming remarks in front of an honor guard.⁸² At the White House, Kennedy walked privately with Nkrumah through the Rose Garden, frankly explaining the American thought process behind funding of the Volta River Project (VRP). Though Cold War concerns were causing many of his advisors to caution him against funding the dam, Kennedy wanted to proceed due to the connections that could be obtained from rebuilding the US-Ghanian relationship and collaboration on construction of the VRP.⁸³ Following this personal appeal, Kennedy introduced Nkrumah to Jackie and his daughter, Caroline. This encounter made a significant emotional impact on Nkrumah, and he left the meeting with high hopes for future relations with Kennedy and the United States.⁸⁴ Kennedy also had renewed hopes for the benefits of a personal connection with Nkrumah, and began assessing his options for funding the Volta River Project.

⁸² "President Kennedy Greets Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, President of Ghana, on Arrival at Washington International Airport, Washington, D.C.," 8 March 1961. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

⁸³ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 80.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 96.

Ultimately, Kennedy's combination of moral appeals and funding for the Volta River Dam were successful in creating a personal bond with Nkrumah. However, the Ghanaian president's political views shifted only slightly, remaining somewhere in between Communism and nonalignment. Nkrumah remained a vocal critic of many elements of Kennedy's Cold War agenda and embraced attempts by the Communist world to court him, including going on vacation with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, spending two weeks in the People's Republic of China, and accepting the Lenin Peace Prize.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, Kennedy's funding of the Volta River Dam provided benefits to both Ghana and the United States and gave JFK experience with courting African nationalists as president. He quickly utilized this experience in meeting dozens of African leaders during each year of his presidency.

Though President Kennedy met with numerous African nationalists, built strong relationships with those leaders based on moral trust, and deployed aid programs to those leaders' countries, his pragmatic Cold War agenda remained the final word in his decision-making. This agenda caused significant contradictions to his seemingly unflappable moral drive to assist vulnerable African nations. Three situations most representative of his pragmatic Cold War diplomacy overriding any morals include his quiet support of South Africa, his inaction on Portuguese use of American weapons in Angola and Guinea Bissau, and his ceding of the Azores Air Force Base. With each of these contradictions, Kennedy's inaction spoke louder than any moral rhetoric about the importance of African nationalism and self-determination.

⁸⁵ Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, p. 170.

During Kennedy's presidency, two Portuguese colonies began a grassroots struggle for independence. Guinea-Bissau and Angola's paths to independence were unique in comparison to countries such as Guinea, Ghana, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), or Kenya (though guerilla warfare in Kenya encompassed a significant part of Kenya's struggle against British colonization). Rather than a nationalist political party organizing a transfer of power between colonial and independent governance, with the new government closely resembling its colonial predecessor, Guinea-Bissau and Angola attained independence primarily through guerilla warfare. Though Portugal used US equipment to wage a brutal war with these revolutionary movements after specific instruction not to use US weapons, Kennedy did not challenge his NATO ally.⁸⁶

In Guinea-Bissau, a power-to-the-people revolution was headed by Amilcar Cabral, leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC). A brilliant revolutionary and theorist, Cabral emphasized achieving independence with minimal outside assistance. Cuba provided technicians, medical supplies, and strategic guidance to Cabral's cause, but war against colonizing Portugal was primarily fought by the guerrillas of the PAIGC.

Angola's war was complicated by their possession of rich oil deposits and natural resources. Three revolutionary movements, the (FLNA) National Front for the Liberation of Angola, Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), and National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) all jostled for control of Angola. The FNLA and UNITA

⁸⁶ Piero Gleijeses, *The First Ambassadors: Cuba's Contribution to Guinea-Bissau's War of Independence* (Journal of Latin American Studies, vol. 29, no. 1, 1997, pp. 45–88. JSTOR) p. 57.

were both backed by the United States and South Africa, while the MPLA was backed by the Soviet Union and Cuba.⁸⁷ The organization of the MPLA closely resembled that of the PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau, as the movement attempted to give power to the people, partook in guerilla warfare, and was given weapons, training, and medical support by Cuba.⁸⁸

The Kennedy administration came into the picture in early 1963. As Portugal engaged African revolutionaries in Angola and Guinea-Bissau, the Portuguese Air Force began brutal bombing campaigns in both countries. Napalm was used to raze villages and hiding places. The campaign was relentless, resembling American air offensives in Vietnam. Though Portugal's actions constituted a serious human rights violation, the US did nothing. Kennedy continued to take no action even as UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson relayed news directly concerning US interests. As a NATO ally, Portugal was part of the American Military Assistance Program (M.A.P.) Portugal was using "eight US-supplied F-86 aircraft" in the bombing of Guinea-Bissau, despite clear instructions from US diplomats that any weapons supplied to Portugal were to be used for NATO-related affairs in Europe only. In sending the planes to Guinea-Bissau and Angola, Portugal had blatantly disregarded this agreement and prompted a response from the US.

Despite Adlai Stevenson's concerns and Assistant Secretary for African Affairs G. Mennen Williams' proclamation of the "embarrassment" this matter caused to the US, Kennedy refused to take action against Portugal. American diplomats complained to

⁸⁷ Ryszard Kapuscinski, *Another Day of Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1976) p. 1.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 2.

Lisbon, but “not too harshly, as Portugal was a valued ally.”⁸⁹ In the words of a Portuguese general, “now and then the Americans would grumble [about the use of American weapons in Guinea-Bissau] ... It was all for show.”⁹⁰ Kennedy’s pragmatic Cold War agenda prevented him from taking action against this Portuguese violation of American instructions. In fact, the US seemed more concerned about the incident going public than the actual use of the weapons or the human rights violations being dealt by their own planes.⁹¹

The reason for this was that Portugal possessed ownership of the Azores Air Force base. Located in a key strategic geolocation on the island of Lajes, the base provided the US Air Force with rapid access to Europe, the Middle East or Africa. In the words of Ambassador Stevenson, the Azores base decision showed Africans across the continent whether the US stood for “self-determination and human rights, and, therefore, the mind of Africa, or whether... we give our Azores base priority.”⁹² After much White House internal debate between advisors insistent on the Cold War strategic importance of Azores and advisors insisting that morally-appealing US policy towards Africa took precedence, Kennedy had to make a decision on the matter. In line with his other decisions between morals and Cold War diplomacy, he sided with his pragmatic concerns to preserve access to the Azores base. Though their lease on the base was not renewed, Kennedy backed off pressuring Portugal on their use of US weapons in Angola and Guinea-Bissau.⁹³ This

⁸⁹ Piero Gleijeses, *The First Ambassadors: Cuba’s Contribution to Guinea-Bissau’s War of Independence* (Journal of Latin American Studies, vol. 29, no. 1, 1997, pp. 45–88. JSTOR) p. 58.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 60.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 59.

⁹² Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, p. 210.

⁹³ Ibid, p. 223.

conclusion highlighted that, for Kennedy, NATO concerns and Cold War alliances still took precedence over matters of African independence.

Kennedy's inaction over Angola and Guinea-Bissau had sharp parallels to the President's response to South Africa. The minority-ruled nation had practiced white minority rule and segregation since the beginning of European involvement in southern Africa. In the mid-20th century, this practice was extended under Apartheid, formalizing the complete separation of Africans and Europeans.

The United States had long-established relations with Apartheid South Africa. Since Apartheid began under South Africa's National Party in 1948, relations between the US and South Africa had been economically beneficial, yet filled with trepidation. The National Party quickly established themselves as staunch anti-communists, making cooperation with the United States beneficial. In addition, South Africa had a strategic geolocation and was rich in natural resources. Thus, a NASA missile tracking station was established in Hartebeesthoek, and trade for mineral resources prospered.⁹⁴ For the most part, apartheid had been conveniently ignored by United States presidents since 1948.

Such was the situation Kennedy inherited as he assumed the Presidency. Due to the fact that South Africa was a strong trading partner, a host for US military communications, and a stalwart against communism, Kennedy refused to take significant action to encourage African self-determination. As with Portugal, his highest priority appeared to be avoiding any negative press surrounding the country - a "no news is good news" approach.

⁹⁴ Alex Thomson, *U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Apartheid South Africa 1948-1994: Conflict of Interests* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) p. 8.

In another similarity to the Azores base issue, Kennedy pragmatically attempted to play both sides of Apartheid. Months after congratulating President Charles R. Swart on the advent of South Africa's transformation from a monarchy to a republic, Kennedy penned a letter of congratulations to Chief Albert Luthuli for his winning of the Nobel Peace Prize. Luthuli was leader of the African National Congress, a prominent South African political group advocating for the end of white minority rule.⁹⁵ Though this message infuriated the Apartheid government, Kennedy decided that promoting his moral stance on South Africa generated positive press, especially with domestic Civil Rights groups.

However, where JFK drew the line on supporting black South Africans was imposing any significant consequences against the Nationalist Party's apartheid policies. Kennedy's advisors were fiercely divided on this issue. G. Mennen Williams wrote "We must back our condemnation [of apartheid] with some form of meaningful action... A complete arms embargo is the least the US can do..."⁹⁶ Assistant UN Ambassador Francis Plimpton declared "The US abhors... apartheid" and that South Africa was certain to abandon their "hateful racial policies" at some point.⁹⁷ On the other hand, Secretary of State Dean Rusk proclaimed "it is worth reminding ourselves that there are other states where obnoxious practices exist."⁹⁸ He upheld his point later, proclaiming that the US was not a "self-elected gendarme for the political and social problems of other states."⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Countries. South Africa, Republic of: General, 1961. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

⁹⁶ Thompson, *U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Apartheid South Africa 1948-1994*, p. 36.

⁹⁷ Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, p. 241.

⁹⁸ Thompson, *U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Apartheid South Africa 1948-1994*, p. 37.

⁹⁹ Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, p. 242.

Kennedy eventually imposed an arms embargo on South Africa via UN Council Resolution 181. However, this was rather a toothless restriction. Only small weapons such as handguns and machine guns were prohibited, and arms contracts made prior to the embargo announcement were still honored. Desiring to maintain positive relations with South Africa due to Cold War benefits, Kennedy used the arms embargo to appeal to African on the grounds of adhering to their grievances. Despite the embargo's complete lack of enforcement, it was effective in appeasing a group of 32 African nations into withdrawing a formal UN security request into the investigation of Portugal and South Africa.

South Africa and Portugal represented direct conflicts of interest between Kennedy's established moral drive to support African self-determination through the courting of nationalist leaders, and his ever-present Cold War agenda. In contradicting his moral compassion by making pragmatic compromises with both countries, Kennedy showed that his Cold War policy always took precedence. Once again, Kennedy's words spoke louder than his actions, but, nonetheless, his words were sufficient for the African nationalists he had established a personal connection with.

Chapter 3: The Peace Corps

John F. Kennedy's inaugural address became one of the most memorable in history. Kennedy combined morals and pragmatism to provide hope to all listening. He made a pledge to newly-independent nations that "one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny."¹⁰⁰ He recognized the importance of nonalignment, accepting that these newly independent states would not always support the US, but "we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom."¹⁰¹ This moral promise was followed by a pragmatic allusion to the Cold War, in which he declared "remember on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate."¹⁰² Delivered with witty Kennedy oration, such practical rhetoric sharply contrasted the language of hopes and dreams employed discussing the states suffering from "colonial control". The most lasting line was his conclusion, stating "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Though his Cold War declarations were in line with the status quo, Kennedy's moral proclamations had a tremendous impact. The morals highlighted in this legendary inaugural address did not just inspire Americans to take a more open-minded look at the world, but also inspired them to partake in service to their country. With the creation of the Peace Corps, Kennedy afforded them this opportunity. The Peace Corps is one of the most famous programs started by President Kennedy. In addition to fulfilling the vision laid out in his inaugural address, the

¹⁰⁰ *President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address*. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Peace Corps embodies a strong tension between moral rhetoric and pragmatic action.

Whereas the Peace Corps claims to help third-world countries, in reality it fails to enact real change while serving as an advertisement for American foreign policy.

The timing of Kennedy's election could not have been better. In 1960, the year leading up to his election, sixteen African nations attained independence. As President, Kennedy continued courting African nationalists. On March 1, 1961, only two months into his presidency, he established the Peace Corps by Executive Order. Inspired by Operations Crossroads Africa, the Peace Corps sent Americans abroad to assist in a wide variety of grassroots services.¹⁰³ This government-sponsored program was the epitome of an endeavor motivated by JFK's combination of morals and Cold War pragmatism. On one hand, Kennedy understood the ambitions of many young Americans to "contribute to a greater purpose," and promote "peace and understanding"¹⁰⁴ via support for countries "where our help is needed."¹⁰⁵ A young doctor "willing to spend their days in Ghana"¹⁰⁶ embodied the ideal candidate - every volunteer would "share in the great common task of bringing to man that decent way of life which is the foundation of freedom and a condition of peace." In addition to providing help to the people of a needy country and giving the volunteer personal growth, the program positioned volunteers to serve as ambassadors for America.

¹⁰³ Jonathan Weaver, *Operation Crossroads Africa and the "Progenitors of the Peace Corps"* (National Peace Corps Association, Article. 20 December 2021.)

¹⁰⁴ "President Kennedy's Rose Garden Send-Off to the First Group of Peace Corps Volunteers." August 28, 1961. [Peacecorps.gov](https://www.peacecorps.gov).

¹⁰⁵ James Tobin, JFK at the Union: The Impromptu Campaign Speech that Launched the Peace Corps (National Peace Corps Association, Article. 15 October 2020.)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

The Peace Corps was more multifaceted than just personal development through service and an extension of Kennedy's African courting, however. Realizing the existence of a Soviet program consisting of young professionals "prepared to spend their lives abroad in the service of world communism,"¹⁰⁷ Kennedy pursued the creation of a competing program. His proclamation that he wanted to "demonstrate to Mr. Khrushchev that a new generation of Americans... [who will] serve the cause of freedom as servants of peace around the world" clearly demonstrates the Cold War's influence on the Peace Corps.¹⁰⁸ The question of whether the Peace Corps was designed to show the Soviet Union the power of American foreign service, or whether it was an extension of Kennedy's relationship-building with African nations, does not have a clear answer. In line with Kennedy's dilemma between pragmatism and morals, the Peace Corps was established for a combination of both considerations.

With both moral and pragmatic considerations playing such a large role in the creation of the Peace Corps, the program had polarizing results in Africa. The Peace Corps promoted positive change by increasing optimism for the future, providing grassroots support to local residents - particularly in education - and strengthening relations between Kennedy and African nationalists. However, its use as a Cold War foreign policy device led to several negatives, including operating as an ideologically conflicted program, backlash against volunteers, and inexperienced volunteers' inability to enact real change. The program was polarizing and ultimately served the interests of the US in their fight against

¹⁰⁷ "Peace Corps", website. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

¹⁰⁸ Rebecca Kaliff, *The "Peace Corps Postcard": A Brief History of Peace Corps Critiques* (Peace Corps Community Archive at American University, Article. 5 November 2021.)

communism than the interests of the African nations Peace Corps Volunteers were deployed to. The Peace Corps program had high ambitions through rhetoric and promises, yet failed to take significant actions to invoke real change.

JFK assigned R. Sargent Shriver, his brother-in-law, to direct the Peace Corps. While touring Africa in search of prospective countries, Sargent Shriver found his reputation as a relative of Kennedy's preceded him. The fact that Shriver was related to Kennedy made him a sensation in Guinea, where family ties are deeply ingrained into politics.¹⁰⁹ Touring villages and cities, Shriver was welcomed by cheering crowds. The benefits of Kennedy's personal courting of African nationalists directly resulted in this enthusiasm. African nationalists and ordinary citizens alike revered Kennedy, and by extension revered Shriver. The Peace Corps' use as a "solicitous concern" for African leaders gave, by extension, hope for the future to ordinary residents.¹¹⁰

Peace Corps volunteers lived with African families and assisted them in their daily lives, mostly performing a variety of odd jobs. Meals and lodging were provided by host countries, in exchange for compensation from the State department. The fact that the Peace Corps promised to provide personal, grassroots attention to issues faced by Africans, with the prospect of lasting connections with Americans interested in their issues, was enormously exciting to people across Africa. In line with the excitement of independence, the promise of hosting Peace Corps volunteers gave Africans enormous hope for the future.

¹⁰⁹ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 64.

¹¹⁰ Bruce Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Longman, 1976) p. 110.

One of the most popular positions for the Peace Corps Volunteers was teaching. In his speeches proclaiming the necessity of the Peace Corps, Kennedy claimed that education was “what Africa needs and wants first... we must send educated men to run the schools.”¹¹¹ The first contingent of volunteers, sent to Ghana, were teachers.¹¹² A large proportion of the initial volunteers sent to Ghana, Guinea, and Ethiopia worked in education. The Peace Corps’ strategy was to spend three months teaching inexperienced volunteers the rudimentary skills needed to teach African students, before sending them into the field for a two-year teaching job at various locations around their host country. This strategy was a complete success due to timing and efficiency. Rapidly globalizing countries such as Guinea, Ghana, and Ethiopia each needed teachers for their school systems. With most young Africans opting for ministry jobs or other urban-based positions, demand for teachers far exceeded supply.¹¹³ As they possessed hundreds of enthusiastic volunteers ready to contribute to solving grassroots issues, R. Sargent Shriver and his Peace Corps found themselves in a unique position to solve this problem.

In Ethiopia, education was a top priority. Emperor Haile Selassie appointed himself State Head of Education, and saw to the opening of several schools. Social welfare, including hospital construction, promotion of education, and abolition of slavery had been a high priority for the Emperor since his rise to the throne in 1916. As the only sub-Saharan African nation to resist colonization (besides a brief occupation by Italy during World War

¹¹¹ *Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at Student Convocation*, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, February 12, 1960. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

¹¹² Stanley Meisler, *Peace Corps Teaching in Africa* (“Africa Report”, New York. Vol. 11, Issue 9.) December 1, 1966, p. 16.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

II), Selassie had built a strong sense of national pride among his people. The Emperor understood the necessity of educating future leaders. In tandem with the Kenyan Airlift, Ethiopian students were sent abroad for training in a wide variety of fields.¹¹⁴ Innovatively, Ethiopia received students from other African countries.¹¹⁵ Selassie's own study abroad programs sent students to Europe as early as the 1930s. During a 1963 State Trip to the US, the Emperor took time to visit Ethiopian students in New York City.¹¹⁶ The arrival of the Peace Corps in Ethiopia was of huge importance to the Emperor, as it was a step furthering his drive to educate his country.

By 1963, there were 1300 Peace Corps volunteers in Ethiopia, including 275 high school teachers. Interestingly, breaking the Peace Corps traditionally-younger volunteer contingent were two female teachers aged 66 and 65. Sargent Shriver reported the Emperor's "delight" at the Peace Corps' educational progress in Ethiopia. The Emperor even visited several schools where Peace Corps volunteers were teaching, watching lessons as if he were a pupil. His enthusiasm mirrored that of the rest of the Ethiopian government.¹¹⁷ To a leader as passionate about education as Emperor Haile Selassie, the arrival of Peace Corps teachers was a message that JFK cared about the issues facing Ethiopia. Other African leaders shared this sentiment regarding education, as their countries faced similar challenges.

¹¹⁴ "Your Guide to Ethiopia, the Land of the Queen of Sheba". *Folder*: Africa. April 14-26, 1963. *Box*: Sargent Shriver (#214) Personal Papers, BOX 28.

¹¹⁵ JFK Speech at Saint Anselm, 1960. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

¹¹⁶ "Faces of Africa: Haile Selassie" CGTN Africa, YouTube.

¹¹⁷ "Series 23. Peace Corps: Trip File of R. Sargent Shriver". *Folder*: Africa. April 14-26, 1963. *Box*: Sargent Shriver (#214) Personal Papers, BOX 28.

As leader of the first African nation to achieve independence, Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah was anxious to receive Peace Corps volunteers. In conversation with Director Shriver, Nkrumah considered the Peace Corps a “bold, splendid idea”, and requested 270 school teachers, in addition to other technical workers. The Ghanaian President “did not want executives, [we] want workers.”¹¹⁸ On August 28, 1961, the first contingent of the Peace Corps was deployed to Ghana, consisting entirely of teachers. The volunteers largely succeeded in their positions.

African leaders were enticed by the prospect of the Peace Corps, improving their relationship with President Kennedy. Largely thanks to the Peace Corps and the hope it represented, an ambassador found JFK was “extremely popular” throughout Ghana.¹¹⁹ Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere thanked the Peace Corps for their help in facilitating “the [post-independence] expansion we are so proud of, [which otherwise] would not have been possible.”¹²⁰ Other African nationalists gave Kennedy “additional gratitude” for his creation of the Peace Corps.¹²¹ Ultimately, the Peace Corps was partially motivated by Kennedy’s genuine moral compassion. Motivated to provide an opportunity for Americans to assist those less fortunate, the creation of the Peace Corps accomplished this task. In addition to assisting everyday people of African nations, especially with education, the program provided hope for the future for African people. Already excited by the prospect of independence from colonial governance, the Peace Corps gave ordinary African

¹¹⁸ Box 28: R. Sargent Shriver Personal Papers. Folder: “Round the World Trip, 1961.”

¹¹⁹ “Letter from Ambassador H. Frank Williams to Sargent Shriver”, 1966. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

¹²⁰ Stanley Meisler, *Peace Corps Teaching in Africa* (“Africa Report”, New York. Vol. 11, Issue 9.) December 1, 1966, p. 16.

¹²¹ Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World*, p. 89.

individuals seemingly limitless potential. In most cases, this optimism was returned by Peace Corps volunteers, and strong connections between Africans and Volunteers resulted. This occurred in something of a similar fashion to the connections made between Kennedy and African nationalists. Connections between people over productive work - such as education - are overwhelmingly positive affairs. The Peace Corps accomplished the challenge laid out in Kennedy's inaugural address - "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."¹²² The program succeeded at providing everyday Americans with an opportunity to make heartfelt connections with ordinary people from across the world.

However, largely thanks to its built-in Cold War agenda, the Peace Corps fell short in several crucial categories. While the connections between Peace Corps volunteers and African citizens were genuine, any positive change imposed by volunteers proved exceedingly difficult to quantify. This was due to the lack of vision for the Peace Corps. Along with speeches highlighting the moral necessity of promoting "peace and understanding" in needy countries, Kennedy also revealed that his Cold War agenda was a driving force behind the program's creation. In JFK's words, the Soviet Union had "hundreds of men and women, scientists, physicists, teachers, engineers, doctors, and nurses... prepared to spend their lives abroad in the service of world communism."¹²³ To compete with the African connections being made by Soviet volunteers, the US needed its own foreign service volunteer program. In stark contrast to his earlier message of assisting

¹²² *JFK Inaugural Address*. January 20, 1961, JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

¹²³ "Peace Corps", website. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

countries “where our help is needed,” the US countered Soviet “missionaries for international Communism” by sending their own international volunteers to promote the interests of American foreign policy. In “demonstrating” to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev that “young Americans will serve... freedom as the communists work for their system,” Kennedy redefined the Peace Corps as an extension of his Cold War agenda.¹²⁴ This shift in rhetoric complicated the Peace Corps’ message, leading to numerous problems.

The duality of attempting to perform morally-motivated community service, while also promoting Cold War interests gave the Peace Corps an overly complex mission. This mission was never clarified. Concrete goals for what the Peace Corps wanted to accomplish in Africa were never set. The primary goal in creation of the program seemed to be quick fulfillment of JFK’s famous 2 AM Michigan Union speech, in which he first asked for volunteers willing to “contribute part of your life to this country” through foreign service.¹²⁵ As Kennedy’s inaugural address further solidified excitement for the creation of the Peace Corps, a clear mission goal for the program was tossed out in favor of rhetoric related to the promotion of peace, understanding, personal growth, selfless altruism, and promotion of American foreign policy.

The Peace Corps launched less than two months after Kennedy’s inauguration, on March 1, 1961. The first volunteers departed for Ghana and Tanganyika only three months later, in mid-August 1961. With a program created so quickly, there was little time to

¹²⁴ “Peace Corps”, website. JFK Library, Dorchester, MA.

¹²⁵ James Tobin, JFK at the Union: The Impromptu Campaign Speech that Launched the Peace Corps (National Peace Corps Association, Article. 15 October 2020.)

develop long term goals or gather data on what tangible change volunteers aimed to achieve during their time as teachers, farmers, or working any other odd job. The Peace Corps became a “schizophrenic” organization, unsure if it wanted to promote real change within a country, build connections with local residents, or stand as an advertisement for the benefits attained by making connections with the United States.¹²⁶

Sargent Shriver realized the potential of a “large and well-organized” Peace Corps to make real socioeconomic change. However, due to the attachment of Kennedy’s Cold War agenda to the Peace Corps, “good intentions” on the part of volunteers was a sufficient achievement.¹²⁷ Positivity and good intentions resulted in connections between volunteers and local residents, and such collective sentiment added up to improved relations between Kennedy and the leaders of countries hosting Peace Corps volunteers. Ultimately, the Peace Corps found itself without a clear vision for what it wanted to accomplish or how it was going to execute any concrete goal towards improving the lives of everyday Africans. This lack of identity was partially by design, in order to best appeal to African leaders. The connections made between volunteers and local residents - whether due to official Peace Corps activities or not - represented the morals of the peace corps, and the promotion of Americans as honest, trustworthy, and morally-driven individuals represented the program’s pragmatism. JFK once again allowed pragmatic Cold War considerations to be the primary objective of his program. What little real change was achieved by volunteers

¹²⁶ Robert L. Strauss, *Think Again: The Peace Corps* (Foreign Policy Magazine, article. 22 April, 2008.)

¹²⁷ Robert L. Strauss, *Think Again: The Peace Corps* (Foreign Policy Magazine, article. 22 April, 2008.)

was irrelevant so long as their efforts attained positive diplomatic progress with African leaders.

The Peace Corps not-so-subtle association with promotion of Kennedy's Cold War agenda caused occasional backlash against Peace Corps volunteers. While Kwame Nkrumah told Sargent Shriver the Peace Corps was a "bold, splendid idea," he later described the program as a "new instrument to cover the ideological arena" of the United States.¹²⁸ A Ghanaian column equated the "peaceful looking white peace corps meddler" with a "C.I.A. agent or embassy stooge."¹²⁹

Such descriptors were difficult to escape for a program with such a confused vision. Declaring the Peace Corps a US neo-colonial device designed to win the hearts of nonaligned African leaders, the column posited that all Peace Corps volunteers are "carefully screened by the FBI," and "members of the Peace Corps have been exposed and expelled from many African countries for acts of subversion or prejudice."¹³⁰ Though these claims are misrepresented, the fact remains that the Peace Corps' confused vision made it easy for Nkrumah and other patriotic Ghanaians to arrive at this conclusion.

With the Peace Corps established as an easy target in resistance to American Cold War diplomacy, the program was on thin ice in Nkrumah's Ghana. Blaming numerous assassination attempts and terrorist activities on the CIA, Nkrumah called for the expulsion of all Peace Corps volunteers on the grounds that they were "subversive agents" employed

¹²⁸ Kwame Nkrumah, "The Mechanisms of Neo-Colonialism." In *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, 239–254. (New York: International Publishers, 1966.)

¹²⁹ Jean Allman, *Exiles, Expatriates, and Malcolm X: Debating the Racial Politics of Liberation in the Black Star of Africa* in "The Journal of African History" (2022), 63(1), p. 94.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

by the agency.¹³¹ The fact that US funding of Ghana's Volta River project went in tandem with the Peace Corps did not help the association between the Peace Corps and promotion of a CIA-backed Cold War agenda. In an attempt to calm the storm, Sargent Shriver flew to Ghana and informed Nkrumah that President Kennedy had given him "personal assurance" that the Peace Corps was in no way connected with the CIA.¹³² In Nigeria, similar questions persisted about motivation behind the Peace Corps' mission. These suspicions were brought to a fever pitch after the discovery of a postcard describing the country's "squalor and absolutely primitive" living conditions.¹³³ The postcard sparked outrage from Nigerian students, who proclaimed Peace Corps volunteers were "international spies."¹³⁴ Such accusations were a direct cause of Kennedy's association of the Peace Corps with Cold War diplomacy. Though Kennedy and Sargent Shriver worked to emphasize the morally-motivated aspects of the Peace Corps, especially the opportunity for connection, they were unable to escape suspicion that their program harbored deeper ambitions. These suspicions were due to Kennedy's promotion of the Peace Corps as a competitor to a similar Soviet program.

The Nigerian postcard was written by Marjorie Michelmores, a recent liberal-arts graduate from the US East Coast. She hailed from a similar background as the majority of Peace Corps volunteers. As recent liberal-arts graduates, most volunteers possessed little teaching experience or technical skills. Though the Peace Corps training promoted civil

¹³¹ Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, p. 185.

¹³² Ibid, p. 232.

¹³³ Rebecca Kaliff, *The "Peace Corps Postcard": A Brief History of Peace Corps Critiques* (Peace Corps Community Archive at American University, Article. 5 November 2021.)

¹³⁴ Rebecca Kaliff, *The "Peace Corps Postcard": A Brief History of Peace Corps Critiques* (Peace Corps Community Archive at American University, Article. 5 November 2021.)

rights through the viewing of collections of speeches by Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and excerpts from Kennedy's moral addressing of civil rights, but less than five percent of PCVs were black.¹³⁵ In addition, Kennedy called for "technical experts" in his speeches promoting foreign service, but the majority of PCVs were nothing of the sort. This lack of possession of the critical skills required to promote real third-world change was felt by PCVs and non-PCVs alike. Former President Dwight Eisenhower called the Peace Corps a "juvenile experiment."¹³⁶ The first group of volunteers, dubbed "Kennedy's Kids," doubted their own ability to make a significant difference. Christopher Dodd proclaimed it was a "presumptuous idea that I - an English Literature Major - was somehow going to eradicate ignorance, poverty, and disease."¹³⁷ David J. Dwyer reported that he "gained more than I could possibly gain, for Cameroonians taught me things that I could not easily find in my own culture."¹³⁸ This sentiment of 'receiving more than they could give' was echoed in a 1961 Peace Corps survey, where over 90% of volunteers agreed they "gained more than they put into their countries of service."¹³⁹

Though Peace Corps volunteers benefited tremendously from their experiences in Africa, their inexperience and lack of specialization led to an inability to enact real progress within their host countries. Kennedy and Shriver's initiative to recruit young, liberal arts Peace Corps volunteers was part of their Cold War agenda. These volunteers brought

¹³⁵ Julius A. Amin, *The Peace Corps and the Struggle for African American Equality* in "Journal of Black Studies 29", no. 6 (1999): 809-26.

¹³⁶ Rebecca Kaliff, *The "Peace Corps Postcard": A Brief History of Peace Corps Critiques* (Peace Corps Community Archive at American University, Article. 5 November 2021.)

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Amin, *The Peace Corps and the Struggle for African American Equality*, p. 824.

¹³⁹ Amin, *The Peace Corps and the Struggle for African American Equality*, p. 826.

tremendous energy and positivity to their host families, students, and countries. Their youthful traits enabled them to make bona fide connections with everyday Africans. However, while mutual connection was strong, upon the departure of the Peace Corps volunteers, the hosting country was left with a largely unchanged socioeconomic status. It is perhaps silly to expect a group of recent graduates to have a significant impact on a newly-independent, economically vulnerable African nation. Nonetheless JFK's pragmatic Cold War agenda is largely to blame for creating the situation in the first place. Overall, though Kennedy's moral considerations gave the Peace Corps several positive qualities, the program made up a large part of his Cold war Agenda. Thus, the Peace Corps was unable to escape its role as a promoter of American foreign diplomacy. The legacy of the Peace Corps today remains contradictory: though volunteers experience personal growth and make new connections through their experience, they struggle to enact real change and are often unable to escape association with white saviorism and neocolonialism.

Chapter 4: Parallels between Civil Rights and African Independence

A similarity to John F. Kennedy's relationship building with African nationalists was his response to civil rights issues. President Kennedy used his success with courting African nationalists to gain support from civil rights leaders, and vice versa. With regard to African independence and civil rights, Kennedy used appeals to gain the trust of previously vulnerable individuals. In addition, he spoke strongly in favor of civil rights but hesitated to take actions that could compromise his domestic support. Ultimately, though Africans were enticed by his Civil Rights promises, Kennedy's actual track record disappointed civil rights leaders. His response to civil rights was another case of words speaking louder than actions.

Several African nationalists assisted JFK's attempts to gain domestic civil rights support. This included Emperor Haile Selassie's image as a symbol of inspiration for civil rights, intercultural exchanges between African nationalists and African American civil rights leaders, and the increased trust Africans had in Kennedy after his moral appeal for civil rights legislation. However, Kennedy was unable to create lasting change on civil rights. This was evident in the racism experienced by African diplomats visiting the United States, Kennedy's complete lack of response to Freedom Rides, and the President's bizarre strategy of promoting positive relationships with African leaders as a replacement for concrete civil rights progress.

There are numerous parallels between civil rights and African independence. The two movements fueled each other. Just as Kennedy sought to build relationships with African nationalists, African and African American leaders attempted to learn from one

another. Prior to becoming the President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah studied at Lincoln University. Experiencing firsthand the oppression experienced by African-Americans, Nkrumah drew parallels to his experience growing up in British-controlled Ghana. Returning to Ghana, Nkrumah's experience in the United States fueled his pursuit of attaining independence in his homeland. Rising to the head of the Convention People's Party, Nkrumah was elected as the first President of Independent Ghana in 1957. Newly-anointed President Nkrumah invited several civil rights leaders to Ghana's independence ceremony, including Martin Luther King Jr.¹⁴⁰ Witnessing the successful Ghanaian quest for independence instilled confidence in King and his fellow civil rights leaders. Upon his return to the US, King soon became a nationally recognized leader of the civil rights movement.

Just as MLK Jr. was inspired by his meeting with Nkrumah, Black Nationalist leader Malcolm X learned significantly from his travels to newly-independent Ghana and Kenya. Speaking in Kenya, Malcolm X praised the resilience of the so-called Mau Mau in their quest for *uhuru* (freedom).¹⁴¹ The experience was also instrumental for Africans who met him. Cassius Nimbus drew parallels between Ghana's struggle for independence and the civil rights movement, declaring "it would be wrong to imagine the plight [of black people in the United States] is one limited to America alone."¹⁴² Malcolm X made an impression on Ghana's National Assembly, with representatives proclaiming support for the

¹⁴⁰ *Ghana Trip*, Martin Luther King Jr. Encyclopedia, Stanford University.

¹⁴¹ Mickie Mwanzia Koster, *Malcolm X, The Mau Mau, and Kenya's New Revolutionaries: A Legacy of Transnationalism* in "The Journal of African American History" (2015.)

¹⁴² Allman, *Exiles, Expatriates, and Malcolm X: Debating the Racial Politics of Liberation in the Black Star of Africa*, p. 98.

Afro-American “morally, physically, materially if necessary.”¹⁴³ Though reaction to his words from ordinary Ghanaians was far more nuanced, lined with confusion regarding his message, Malcolm X ended up applying his experiences in Africa to his quest for civil rights.

Returning to the US, the prominent orator realized that non-racialism was an essential part of the civil rights pursuit. Hearing the stories of Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta in their struggle for independence taught Malcolm X, in his own words, that “a blanket indictment of all white people is as wrong as when whites make blanket indictments against blacks.”¹⁴⁴ By extension, Malcolm X realized the necessity of working with whites in his quest for civil rights, rather than condemning all whites as enemies of civil rights. The inspiration and experience garnered from their interactions with African nationalists inspired Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. to refine their own civil rights movements.

Not only did African-American civil rights leaders make a significant impression in Africa, but African nationalists provided inspiration to African Americans during visits to the United States. While visiting Harlem, Kwame Nkrumah offered African Americans housing in Ghana, to assist in building the nation-state of his newly-independent country. W.E.B. Dubois was among a number of prominent civil rights activists who took up residence in Ghana. Prior to his death in 1963, Dubois and Nkrumah collaborated in regards to their common goals for Pan-Africanism.¹⁴⁵ In addition, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie was a

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 96.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 103.

¹⁴⁵ Elizabeth Ohene, *Ghana's role in honouring US civil rights hero WEB Du Bois* (BBC News, Article. 13 October 2021.)

hugely inspirational figure for Africans and African Americans alike. Following his famous speech to the League of Nations in 1937, African Americans pledged to donate funds and volunteer in support of Ethiopia's fight against Italy.¹⁴⁶ After his League of Nations address, Selassie became an icon representing freedom and civil rights. Kwame Nkrumah was inspired by the Emperor's stand against fascism, "dedicating his life to fighting colonialism" upon hearing of Mussolini's invasion.¹⁴⁷ Visits to the US in 1954 and 1963 demonstrated the Emperor's popularity - Kennedy declared that Selassie's "place in history is already assured", and his 1963 United Nations speech in support of Pan-Africanism was immortalized in a Bob Marley song.¹⁴⁸

A significant parallel between Kennedy's approach to civil rights and to African independence is his use of moral appeals to leaders representing both issues. In 1961, Kennedy faced a civil rights crisis. In Tuscaloosa, two students were blocked entry to the University of Alabama by Governor George H. Wallace. Though the students were eventually allowed to enroll with the deployment of US Marshalls, the scene made obvious the racism present in the United States. Letters were written to JFK, calling on him to exert his "moral force" to integrate the university. A New York Times editorial suggested the President escort the students himself. These appeals showed the reputation JFK had garnered to act with moral qualms in mind, thanks largely to his efforts to build bridges with African nationalists.

¹⁴⁶ Nault, *Africa and the Shaping of International Human Rights*, p. 85.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 85.

¹⁴⁸ John F. Kennedy, "Welcome to Emperor Haile Selassie at Union Station, Washington, D.C., 1 October 1963". JFK Archives, Dorchester, MA.

The incident at the University of Alabama spurred JFK's famous civil rights address. In a televised speech on June 11, 1961, Kennedy highlighted the "moral crisis" faced by the country as a whole. The President declared that significant action was needed to end segregation across the country. Only legislation passed in Congress sufficed. In promising the passage of such a bill rooted in moral qualms, Kennedy received praise from African and African American leaders alike. Martin Luther King Jr. was elated that Kennedy had finally "not only stepped up to the plate, [but] hit it over the fence!"¹⁴⁹ Kwame Nkrumah was deeply moved by Kennedy's moral grandeur, emotionally rereading sections of Kennedy's speech and sending his thanks to Washington. A film of the speech was produced by the United States Information Service Mission and shown across Ghana, generating enormous response.¹⁵⁰ Emperor Haile Selassie expressed "full understanding of the courageous actions" taken by JFK, and "extended his personal congratulations" to the President.¹⁵¹ Kenyan students in the US sent letters home filled with excitement about JFK's civil rights address. In each letter, Kennedy himself was praised as the primary driver behind the change.¹⁵²

Much like his courting of African nationalists was rooted in moral appeals, Kennedy based his call for civil rights legislation on the moral issues behind segregation. Behind the scenes, however, his advisors closely considered the Cold War ramifications such as

¹⁴⁹ Jonathan Rieder, *The Day President Kennedy Embraced Civil Rights—and the Story Behind It* (The Atlantic, Article. 11 June 2013.)

¹⁵⁰ Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, p. 234.

¹⁵¹ "President's Briefing Memo: Visit of the Emperor of Ethiopia". Folder: Ethiopia, Haile Selassie's Visit, 10/63, Briefing Book, Index and Parts I-III. Box 69A: Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries.

¹⁵² Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 203.

announcement calling for a broad civil rights bill would cause.¹⁵³ By deploying his moral grandeur, Kennedy gained support from domestic and international parties alike. Though this endeavor garnered massive support for his reputation on civil rights, the actual concrete action JFK took on the issue remained minimal. Similar to his inaction in support of newly-independent African nations, JFK's words spoke louder than his actions on civil rights

Despite his recognition of the civil rights crisis facing the United States, numerous incidents continued to show that JFK was hesitant to take the steps necessary to enact change in regards to civil rights. Mirroring his relationship-building with African nationalists, action on civil rights were taken when it suited Kennedy's Cold War agenda. This pragmatic inaction with regard to a pressing domestic issue directly impacted African leaders during State visits to the US. While traveling through Maryland, diplomat William Fitzjohn of Sierra Leone was refused service at a Howard Johnson's restaurant. Also in Maryland, Ambassador Adam Malick Sow of Chad was refused service at a roadside restaurant.¹⁵⁴ The Shamrock Hotel in Houston was temporarily integrated to house the Ghanaian Ambassador, but only after Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson's personal intervention in the matter. Once the Ambassador departed, segregation of the facility resumed.¹⁵⁵ These incidents dissatisfied African diplomats previously unfamiliar with the extent of segregation

¹⁵³ Francine Uenuma, *The African Diplomats Who Protested Segregation in the U.S.* (Smithsonian Magazine, Article. 24 February 2023.)

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Nick Bryant, *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Basic Books, 2006) p. 222.

in the US. Fitzjohn's incident was widely publicized by African newspapers, providing an embarrassing blow to Kennedy's courting of African nationalists.¹⁵⁶

White House Deputy Chief of Protocol Pedro Sanjuan undertook a campaign to desegregate US Route 40 between New York and Washington.¹⁵⁷ However, Sanjuan's efforts were not officially endorsed by Kennedy. Weighing the embarrassment already dealt by African and Soviet media covering Southern segregation, numerous members of the Kennedy administration advocated to sweep discriminatory incidents under the rug.¹⁵⁸ While Sanjuan's word-of-mouth campaign was mostly successful at integrating restaurants along Route 40, Kennedy's hesitancy to publicly back the program showed his continued preference for his pragmatic Cold War agenda over civil rights issues or building relationships with African nationalists.

Kennedy's response to Freedom Rides further demonstrated Kennedy's continued preference to put his Cold War agenda over civil rights considerations. Thanks to his moral appeal for civil rights legislation, integration of the University of Alabama was perhaps the most famous civil rights incident of Kennedy's presidency. However, Freedom Rides came before the Stand in the Schoolhouse Door in Alabama, marking the first major civil rights crisis of JFK's tenure. Despite the fact that civil rights activists attempting to bring attention to unlawfully segregated bus transportation had been senselessly attacked by white mobs, Kennedy kept a limited role on the issue, not wanting to cede any negative PR to

¹⁵⁶ Uenuma, *The African Diplomats Who Protested Segregation in the U.S.*

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Stacey Flores Chandler, *Pedro Sanjuan, Insider for Integration* (JFK Library Archives Blog, Article. 15 September 2017.)

Khrushchev and the Soviets.¹⁵⁹ Such inaction, clearly motivated by Kennedy's Cold War agenda, infuriated civil rights leaders. Only when the situation became overpowering, in the case of Alabama desegregation, did Kennedy take a stand and employ his moral qualms towards civil rights.

An unequivocal example of Kennedy's pragmatic placement of his Cold War agenda over civil rights and African nationalism was evident in his meetings with leaders representing both issues. Whereas African diplomats were greeted by President Kennedy himself at the airport, given extravagant welcoming ceremonies, gifts, and other displays of respect, and shown personal touches such as introduction to his family; civil rights leaders were frustrated by a struggle to even receive placement on the President's schedule. While African diplomats were given first class treatment by Kennedy and the State department, civil rights leaders constantly saw their requests for meetings denied. Eventually, a meeting was scheduled and lasted three hours, yet Kennedy made no concrete commitments for civil rights support. Leaving the White House, MLK declared "We still have not had a strong voice from Washington dealing with the moral issues [of civil rights]."¹⁶⁰

In similar fashion, Kennedy initially tried to discourage the March on Washington. As it became apparent that the demonstration was inevitable, he ordered the largest peacetime military buildup in US history.¹⁶¹ As thousands marched past the White House on their way to the Lincoln Memorial, Kennedy presided over a meeting regarding

¹⁵⁹ Bryant, *The Bystander*, p. 472.

¹⁶⁰ Bryant, *The Bystander*, p. 362.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p. 300.

Vietnam.¹⁶² At the last minute, he agreed to meet with MLK, Roy Wilkins, and other civil rights leaders after the event. However, little concrete progress was attained during this meeting.¹⁶³ Kennedy's policy of putting his Cold War agenda above support for civil rights leaders was an extension of his policy towards African nationalists. Afraid that negative PR stemming from civil rights issues could boost the Soviet Union's position, Kennedy hesitated with commitment and opted to make speeches instead of pushing for real change.

The reason Kennedy so vehemently courted African nationalists was that there were very few downsides. Not only did it support his Cold War agenda, but Africans had great enthusiasm in Kennedy's relationship building, believing by extension that he carried the same enthusiasm towards civil rights issues. However, as supporting civil rights had more strings attached than supporting African nationalism, Kennedy doubled down on moral appeals and took little action. His Cold War agenda guided the actions he took. Courting of both parties was accomplished through appeals. Rhetoric replaced action. Nonetheless, civil rights leaders refused to accept inaction, and, faced with a moral crisis in Alabama, Kennedy was forced to commit to broad, sweeping changes to federal legislation.

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 9.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 9.

Conclusion: The Kennedy Legacy in Africa

An overarching sentiment that people have for John F. Kennedy is his trustworthiness. Domestically, people have high trust for Kennedy. A guide at the JFK Museum recalled “you trusted him because he was smart and witty... It seemed like he was one of us... When he died everything stopped...”¹⁶⁴ Today, his influence in American culture remains ever-present. The first sentence in the Google Search description of Dallas, Texas references the museum and memorial paying homage to Kennedy.¹⁶⁵ The primary launch facility for NASA, located in Orlando, is called the John F. Kennedy Space Center. Other important public buildings named after JFK include the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, and John F. Kennedy International Airport. Kennedy’s legacy was recently displayed in popular media, as Prince William and Princess Kate met with President Joe Biden at the JFK Memorial Library in Dorchester, MA. The meeting precluded their announcement of the Earthshot prize, an award inspired by JFK’s 1960 “Moonshot” challenge.¹⁶⁶

This nostalgia for yesteryear also holds true in Africa. JFK’s moral rhetoric and bridge building was often enough for Africans to hold him in high regard, especially after his untimely death. For many years, Ivory Coast issued JFK Memorial Stamps. Older generations of Africans have fond memories of JFK, positioning him as representative of everything great about America. The mere mention of JFK’s name brings a smile to their faces. They also give him credit for foreign aid and education initiatives. Numerous schools across various African countries are named after John F. Kennedy.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Tour Guide Mary at JFK Museum, Dorchester, MA. 29 November 2022.

¹⁶⁵ Google Search, <https://www.google.com/search?q=dallas>.

¹⁶⁶ Jenna Russell, “Bostonians’ Take on the Royals’ Whirlwind Visit? Whatevah.” *New York Times*, 2 December 2022.

Numerous African nationalists look back on their diplomatic relations with Kennedy with nostalgia and reminiscence. Tom Mboya called JFK enlightened, declaring that he “gave the world that much more hope.”¹⁶⁷ Nigerian President Nnamdi Azikiwe equated Kennedy’s untimely death to “sacrifice”, so that “American Negroes may live like human beings and enjoy true citizenship and rights in their own country.”¹⁶⁸ Disappointed with the direction of American foreign policy since Kennedy’s time as President, Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda lamented he was “nostalgic for [the days of Kennedy and Soapy Williams.]”¹⁶⁹

In 1966, Robert F. Kennedy delivered his “Day of Affirmation” speech in South Africa. In his most famous oration, JFK’s younger brother and loyal subordinate well embodies what the former President hoped to achieve in Africa, if not for his staunch and pragmatic Cold War agenda. Speaking with the moral grandeur embodied within his brother, Bobby highlighted the necessity of freedom, the importance of human rights, and the necessity of moral courage in attaining these goals. The most famous part of his speech is as follows:

"It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 226.

¹⁶⁸ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 227.

¹⁶⁹ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 232.

¹⁷⁰ Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Senate Papers. Speeches and Press Releases, Box 2, "'Freedom & Democracy' University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Dorchester, MA.

These words are closely related to the Kennedy family perspective on supporting the rights of the oppressed and weak, especially as themselves “members of a community where the people were hardly a generation away from colonial rule.”¹⁷¹ In this speech, Robert F. Kennedy alluded to his belief that his older brother cared more about Africa than he could pragmatically take action on. This idolization of John F. Kennedy persists across the world, with Americans and Africans alike giving him tremendous credit for both African independence and civil rights. As the world continues to evaluate Kennedy’s connection-building with African nationalists, his establishment of the Peace Corps, and his response to civil rights issues, they will inevitably weigh his gifted oration skills against his pragmatic actions. Who knows what the future holds, but it is certain that the Kennedy legacy will be continually defined as time goes on. Only time will tell if John F. Kennedy is remembered for his words or for his actions.

¹⁷¹ Muehlenbeck, *Courting the Africans*, p. 235.

Appendix:



Footnote 58: Emperor Haile Selassie expected a lavish welcome from the State Department, and was not disappointed. This D.C. parade was followed by a private train to NYC, where a ticker-tape parade greeted the Emperor.



Footnote 112: On the third day of his presidency, Kennedy received word of Congolese Leader Patrice Lumumba's death



Footnote 93: Upon learning of Lumumba's death, Kennedy arranged a meeting with Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah and used personal diplomacy to calm the waters.

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