ISSN: 1753-5794 (online)

Philip E. Muehlenbeck. *Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy's Courting of African Nationalist Leaders*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 360pp.

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In March, 1961, Kwame Nkrumah, the president of newly independent Ghana, became the first foreign head of state to make an official visit to John F. Kennedy's White House. The American president greeted his guest at Washington National Airport, a courtesy rarely extended to visiting dignitaries and which drew a breathless headline in Ghana's *Evening News*. Nkrumah was welcomed to the White House with an honour guard and a twenty-one gun salute, rituals that exceeded the demands of protocol. In a joint press conference, Kennedy lavished praise on the Ghanaian president. The pair then retired for a lengthy discussion with officials present, followed by a tête-à-tête in the Rose Garden.

Such elaborate courtesies were the hallmark of the Kennedy administration's African policy, argues Philip E. Muehlenbeck, a Professorial Lecturer at George Washington University, in his excellent book, the first in-depth study of Kennedy's strategy towards postcolonial Africa. When Kennedy arrived in the White House, decolonisation was well under way. By 1962, 31 of the U.N.'s 110 member states were African. Fearing that neglect or disdain would likely push these new republics into the Soviet orbit, Kennedy embarked on a charm offensive. But, asserts Muehlenbeck, Kennedy's interest in Africa went beyond strategic calculation. He nurtured a romantic attachment to the continent, and to the leaders who sought to throw off the rusting chains of European colonialism. As one experienced American Foreign Service officer observed 'Kennedy liked these new African leaders . . .

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they reminded him of our own founding fathers.' (225) Muehlenbeck puts the Cold War 'at the periphery of Kennedy's African policies.' (xv) Decolonisation, he argues, was the more significant historical force.

Kennedy's solicitousness marked a decisive break with his predecessor's policies. Eisenhower was, as one critic acerbically noted, 'more Royalist than the Queen.'(3) Supporting European partners was considered more important than forging new alliances in Africa. By contrast, Kennedy – as a congressman and then presidential candidate – set out to identify himself forcefully with African nationalism. Declarations of support, and criticisms of Eisenhower's approach, peppered his speeches, and were applauded in Africa. Consequently, Kennedy began his courtship buoyed by African goodwill. An American college student volunteering in Guinea as part of Operation Crossroads Africa (a pilot scheme for the Peace Corps), was astonished at the admiration for the new president that he encountered: 'you'd go into a little village and there would be a mud hut. Inside there would be a calendar on the wall with a picture of Kennedy.' (65-6)

Professor Muehlenbeck makes a convincing case that Kennedy administration's Africa policy depended heavily on the warm personal relationships the charismatic president cultivated with African leaders. The archival base of this book is impressive, encompassing institutions from across the United States, the United Kingdom and Africa. It shows in Muehlenbeck's wonderfully detailed portraits of Kennedy's relations with Africa's leaders, from the overtly Marxist Sékou Touré of Guinea to Felix Houphouët-Boigny, the staunchly conservative and pro-American president of Côte d'Ivoire.

Muehlenbeck is less persuasive on the motivations behind Kennedy's courting. Much is made of Kennedy's willingness to ally himself with African nationalist ambitions even at the risk of antagonising European partners. In early 1961, for example, the United States supported a Liberian resolution in the United Nations calling on Portugal to hasten Angola's

ISSN: 1753-5794 (online)

move towards independence. The Kennedy administration followed up with further pressure on Portugal. Yet when Lisbon threatened not to renew the American lease on the vital air force facilities on the Azore Islands, Kennedy was compelled, albeit reluctantly, to reverse his position. This was no isolated occurrence. Cold War concerns repeatedly trumped other sympathies in the determination of American policy.

Though Kennedy showed greater attentiveness to Africa than other Cold War presidents, one might that this was because he conceptualised America's strategic interests differently. The torch was being passed to a new generation of African leaders and Kennedy was determined that he not be on the side of those trying to wrest it back. Trying to prop up decaying colonialist regimes would only prove counter-productive to America's anti-Communist goals, as the quagmire of Vietnam would soon demonstrate.

The writing of modern American political history remains over-reliant on the presidential synthesis. Presidents' terms divide the past into convenient units and encourage historians, often erroneously, to identify policy development exclusively with presidencies. It is to be hoped that this book will be followed by others that will place Muehlenbeck's admirable work in a broader chronological and institutional context. However, this does not diminish Professor Muehlenbeck's finely-researched contribution to an understudied field. He is to be commended for pulling off an increasingly difficult feat: writing something interesting and original about the presidency of John F. Kennedy.