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Muehlenbeck, Philip E. *Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy's Courting of African Nationalist Leaders*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, xxi + 333 pp.

In *Betting on the Africans*, Muehlenbeck focuses on President John F. Kennedy's relationships with a number of prominent African leaders to analyze his efforts to improve US-Africa relations during his presidency (January 20, 1961 - November 22, 1963). From the outset, Muehlenbeck contrasts "Kennedy's policies of courting Third World nationalism" to the subsequent abandonment of these efforts in a larger shift towards an agenda focused on "Cold War concerns of anticommunism" that dominated other administrations (xiv). This is significant because, as Muehlenberg asserts, the shift away from Kennedy's policies and ideologies relating to Africa and the developing world facilitated a considerable growth in anti-Americanism in subsequent presidencies (xiv).

Muehlenbeck carefully navigates the historiography of mid-twentieth century US-Africa relations by squarely situating this work as an effort to balance "modernization theory with personal diplomacy" (xv). As a result, Muehlenbeck seeks to consider Kennedy as a deeply strategic, yet highly personable figure in the construction of bonds between the US and Africa. Perhaps most importantly, Muehlenbeck perceives decolonization as "the most important historical force of the twentieth century," thus, in gaining African leaders as allies, Kennedy had the ability to gain great respect from Africans while strengthening foreign policy (xvi). Ultimately, it is Muehlenbeck's approach to Kennedy's efforts in US-Africa relations through personal diplomacy that is very striking because it emphasizes a very different kind of diplomatic history that is underrepresented, especially within the histories of Africa, the Cold War, and US relations with Africa and Africans.

While the book could have easily devolved into a series of disconnected case studies in Cold War history, Muehlenbeck carefully crafts a framework for considering the strengths and weaknesses of JFK's personal diplomacy by first beginning with a discussion of foreign policy under Eisenhower. Muehlenbeck then shifts to the Kennedy administration and his approach to African nationalism and US policy. After this somewhat prolonged introduction, Muehlenbeck delves into Kennedy's relationships with individual African leaders like Sékou Touré of Guinea, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Ahmed Ben Bella of Algeria. After examining these spaces, Muehlenbeck transitions to a discussion that focuses on the impact of Kennedy's policies towards Africa and African nationalists, and how these exchanges bled into other areas of domestic and foreign policy. For example, Muehlenbeck gives considerable attention to the precarious nature of Kennedy's stance towards minority rule in South Africa.

While Muehlenbeck attempts to center his dialogue on personal diplomacy, there are critical issues with this approach. For example, Muehlenbeck makes great effort to emphasize Kennedy's early support for African nationalism, especially during his years in Congress and the 1960 presidential campaign. Yet, he essentially explains away the Congo Crisis, which is simply discussed through the lens of how it influenced Kennedy's relationships with other African leaders. This is problematic because Muehlenbeck goes to great lengths to differentiate Kennedy's policies from other Cold War-era leaders, yet actions in the Congo or (in)action in South Africa are not simply aberrations as Muehlenbeck asserts on page xvi, they are indicative of an approach to diplomacy that was deeply personal in some cases, but also very telling in the continuation of pro-Western policies that sought to maintain stability and control in the midst of the Cold War.

While the bulk of Muehlenbeck's limited discussion of the Congo Crisis centers on Lumumba and his death in 1961, it seems as if there is a careful forgetting of the fact that this conflict did not end after the death of Lumumba. There is no sustained or meaningful engagement in an effort to make sense of the extreme limitations of "personal diplomacy" in the case of the longer process of the Congo Crisis. This is troubling because one cannot simply ignore the immense diplomatic implications of the Congo Crisis because it was one of the most important conflicts in the continent of Africa in the years immediately following independence. Designating Kennedy's stance in the Congo Crisis as an anomaly is problematic because it downplays the significance of this horrific event in African history within US policy. While Muehlenbeck provides an engaging and multi-faceted approach to the various ways in which Kennedy practiced personal diplomacy, it is difficult to label this as his dominant method of approaching African politics when some of the most influential and troubling parts of US-Africa diplomacy existed outside of this realm during the Kennedy presidency.

Nevertheless, Muehlenbeck's work is very successful in a number of other areas. Muehlenbeck's chapter on the rivalry between Kennedy and De Gaulle in Africa is especially noteworthy, as it carefully outlines the shifting nature of US-French relations with the (re)construction of spheres of influence during the early 1960s. As Muehlenbeck astutely assesses, De Gaulle "[envisioned] himself as a protective shield from superpower hegemony and Kennedy [saw] himself as a protective shield from French neocolonialism" (163). Thus, in continuation of this theme, Muehlenbeck outlines subtle and not-so-subtle attempts to extend, consolidate, or challenge influences in Africa from both the US and France. While Muehlenbeck's brief introduction to Francophone Africa's affinity with De Gaulle was a bit superficial, the chapter was very successful at capturing the nuanced rivalry between the two leaders by carefully demarcating strategic spaces

in Africa, analyzing motivations, exploring personalities, and assessing policies. Additionally, Muehlenbeck's discussion of US- France tensions that influenced Peace Corps volunteers on the ground in Francophone Africa emphasized ways in which international politics intersected with daily life in a very tangible manner.

Muehlenbeck's chapter on Kennedy's relationship with Sékou Touré was intriguing because it emphasized the complex transformation of US-Guinea relationships, as evidenced by the fact that Eisenhower previously dismissed the Guinean leader as a communist (58). Thus, gaining a relationship with Guinea was a bit more complex than using Kennedy's charm to secure the allegiance of a nation that was already friendly with the US. Yet, through the engaging and well-researched chapter, Muehlenbeck presents the argument that Kennedy "was able to not only influence Guinea back to a position of neutrality but by the end of Kennedy's life the Guinean leader had even become slightly pro-Western" (58). In order to demonstrate this argument, Muehlenbeck chronicles debates over US aid to Guinea, both from US and Guinean perspectives, Touré's visit to Washington in 1962, and the US Civil Rights related, and fabricated, controversy at the OAU conference in Addis Ababa in 1963. By examining these episodes, Muehlenbeck argues for the transformation of US-Guinea relations, which would ultimately facilitate "Guinea's support of John F. Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis, the Congo crisis, and the outbreak of racial violence in the American south, and they could judge Sékou Touré not only by what he did-but also what he said" (72). This chapter is important because it is the first of five case studies of Kennedy's personal diplomacy with some African nations. Yet, as the chapter on Kennedy and Touré reveals, Kennedy's relationships with these leaders varied greatly and provided a range of political opportunities for all actors.

Overall, Muehlenbeck's *Betting on the Africans* is an intriguing and important work that emphasizes the significance of personal diplomacy during Kennedy's presidency. While there are obvious issues with Muehlenbeck's limited discussions of the aforementioned aberrations, the book is largely successful in its efforts to shift towards a different type of Cold War politics, namely, one that focused on Kennedy's personal diplomacy. While there are many books on Africa and the Cold War, I am confident that this monograph will be an important source of information for scholars and students interested in international diplomacy, Africa, and the Cold War.

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