

Noer, Kennedy and Africa

Kennedy denounced Eisenhower administration for ignoring Africa or downplaying the significance of the independence movement.

Suggests Eisenhower's "Europe First" policies have put the US at a disadvantage in Africa vis the Soviets

Eisenhower's equation of neutralism with pro-communism is wrong, or at least overly simplistic. Newly independent African nations cannot be expected to align with their former rulers without compromising their commitment to independence.

"True" neutrals, according to JFK, tolerate dissent and maintain stability within their nations and criticize both sides in the cold war in an objective, even-handed manner – neutrals would refuse to accept the subservience to ideology that communism (and the Soviets) demanded.

Success for the US in Africa meant not losing nations to communism. A defensive diplomacy. Neutralism is ok.

Good relations with African nations had more to do with symbolism and prestige than economic or strategic interests. Fluidity and uncertainty on the continent, however, concerned JFK.

Due to the potential for disorder and radicalism, US involvement became necessary.

Kennedy fears a Soviet offensive in Africa, but Moscow, much like Washington, is just out for "cheap prestige" – offering small aid packages and supportive rhetoric. Only when China takes an interest in the region does Moscow up its game.

Europeanists and Africanists in the Kennedy administration disagree over which region should take priority. Europeanists believe Washington should remain close to former colonial powers and defer to them on African issues; Africanists prefer a break with colonial powers and more active support for newly independent African nations.

African policy tied up with Civil Rights politics and Kennedy must walk a fine line in the middle of the road.

Other immediate crises take priority over long-term policy development in Africa.

Four problem areas in Africa for JFK:
Congo, Angola, South Africa, Ghana

In Congo, a bidding war emerges to see who will become the leader. Rampant bribery. The US favorite – Adoula – wins.

Kennedy supports unity in the Congo, putting him at odds with Britain and Belgium who support Katanga's splitting off from Congo. Some US officials call for military intervention in support of Congo against Katanga. Kennedy remains reluctant to commit.

The UN forces ultimately put down the Katanga revolt and an anti-communist leader emerges to govern all of Congo. Though Washington claims a Cold War victory, in fact Kennedy's policy had been very cautious and the US did not place a decisive role in the outcome of the skirmish.

In Angola, Kennedy must weigh alliance with Portugal against commitment to African independence. Azores military base is at stake. Also fear that Portugal's African colonies are not ready for independence.

Again, JFK is cautious. He supports a UN resolution critical of Portugal and gives aid to Roberto (UPA) to fight the radical MPLA. Other African nations give him little credit for doing so and demand that Portugal be expelled from NATO. Kennedy is frustrated. With the Azores at stake, there seems little reason for Washington to put any further pressure on Portugal.

Support for Portugal could produce a radical revolution in Angola; support for the UPA could undermine NATO and anti-communist Portuguese govt.

CIA proposes massive aid to Portugal in return for it granting independence to Angola. If Portugal refuses, US will overthrow Salazar.

Kennedy agrees to economic aid, not to a coup. Lease on the Azores coming due in 1962 and so Kennedy backs off his criticisms of Portugal and is less supportive of independence for Angola.

Africans react negatively and accuse Washington of abandoning Angola in exchange for keeping a military base in the Azores.

Kennedy gains no good will from his attempt to take a moderate position; ultimately, a Marxist regime leads an independent Angola.

On South Africa, blacks and liberals press JFK to condemn apartheid and impose sanctions.

Some claim sanctions will hurt black majority and other nations will quickly replace the US economically. Also, South Africa is an important source of trade and raw materials, so challenging South Africa is ill-advised.

Others argue that sanctions amounted to "selective rage" and singled out South Africa unfairly. US must not impose its cultural values on another nation. Moreover, the sanctions would exacerbate white intransigence and provoke black violence.

When Kennedy does not impose sanctions, civil rights leaders denounce him. Kennedy still opposes sanctions, but as a compromise agrees to a unilateral US arms embargo against South Africa – really a symbolic gesture, though Noer notes that JFK's distaste for apartheid was genuine.

JFK hopes to woo Guinea and Ghana toward “true” (pro-Western) neutralism and away from the Soviet camp. Promises economic aid.

In Guinea, a Soviet-backed failed coup pushes the government toward the US. US offers aid if Guinea will agree not to criticize US foreign policy or civil rights policies. Desperate for aid, Guinea agrees.

In Ghana, Nkrumah was pro-Soviet and anti-imperialist; he jailed his critics, censored the press, and ruled as a dictator.

Kennedy uses funding of the Volta project as leverage over Nkrumah. He agrees to fund it, but Nkrumah continues his anti-American rhetoric and policies. Kennedy cannot withdraw funding without making it look like he offered money with political “strings attached.”

Kennedy's African policy was more a change in style, rather than substance, from Eisenhower's. He tried to compromise and take a middle way between “Africanists” and “Europeanists.”

In the end, he fully satisfied neither side.