

***Holding the Line:  
Race, Racism, and American Foreign Policy  
toward Africa, 1953-1961***  
**Roundtable Review**



Reviewed Works:

**George White, Jr.** *Holding the Line: Race, Racism, and American Foreign Policy toward Africa, 1953-1961*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. x + 238 pp. Notes, index. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-3382-0; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-3383-7.

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Daniel Byrne, Anne Foster

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## Holding the Line Roundtable

27 November 2007

### Review by Anne Foster, Indiana State University

I am not a scholar of race and U.S. foreign relations. I am not a scholar of U.S. relations with Africa. I am not a scholar of the foreign policy of the Eisenhower administration. I am not a scholar, even, of the Cold War era. I have been asking myself, since beginning to read George White's *Holding the Line: Race, Racism, and American Foreign Policy toward Africa, 1953-1961*, how I could contribute to a roundtable about this fascinating study whose primary contributions appear so distant from my own research interests and expertise. What follows, then, are some thoughts on the questions this book raised for me, from my perspective as a scholar of foreign relations in colonial Southeast Asia during the first decades of the twentieth century. This outsider's perspective does, I hope, illuminate some of the broader importance of what Dr. White offers here, as well as what appear to me to be some of the limitations of his analysis.

Dr. White begins, as so many of us do in so many ways, with W.E.B. DuBois, and notes correctly that DuBois is often truncated. As you read the name DuBois, you are reciting in your mind, I am sure "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." But Dr. White reminds us that there is a continuation to that sentence: "...the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." (p. 1) DuBois's language was carefully chosen: not "white" and "black", but rather "darker" and "lighter". And this problem of the color line is not merely a problem of Africa and Europe/America. It is a global problem. Interestingly, however, immediately after reminding us that DuBois had a broader conception of race as well as a broader understanding of the effects of race on human relations than is typically remembered, Dr. White informs us that his study will examine

**Anne L. Foster** is an Assistant Professor at Indiana State University. She obtained her B.A. at American University and Ph.D in History at Cornell University. She teaches U.S. diplomatic history. She has a forthcoming study from Duke University Press, *Projections of Power: The U.S. in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941* and a number of articles including "Timing, Balance of Power, and the Decision in Vietnam," article for Roundtable on Gareth Porter's *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*, in *Passport*, the newsletter for the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations; "Avoiding the Status of Denmark: Dutch Fears about Loss of Empire in Southeast Asia," solicited chapter forthcoming in *Chris Goscha and Christian Ostermann, eds. Connected Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Asian International History*; co-editor, *The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives*, including my essay, "Models for Governing: Opium and Colonial Policies in Southeast Asia, 1898-1910," (Duke University Press, 2003; Philippine edition by Anvil Press, 2005); "Before the War: Legacies from the Early Twentieth Century in United States-Vietnam Relations," in *Marilyn Young and Robert Buzzanco, eds., Blackwell Companion to the Vietnam War* (Blackwell Publishers, 2002); "Prohibition as Superiority: Policing Opium in South-East Asia, 1898-1925," *International History Review* (June 2000); "Secret Police Cooperation and the Coming of the Cold War in Southeast Asia," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* (December 1995); and "French, Dutch, British and U.S. Reactions to the Nghe-Tinh Rebellions of 1930-1931," in *Stein Tonnesson and Hans Antlov, eds. Imperial Policy and Colonial Revolt* (Copenhagen, 1995).

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only the relations “rooted in American soil and extending to the African continent” (p. 1). Those particular race relations have a history and pathology rich and deep enough, sadly, to provide material for many scholarly works, but the focus on “black” and “white” seems at times reductionist, especially given the complexities of how race operated for Africans, black Americans of African descent, and people of primarily European descent whether in Europe, Africa, or the United States.

The category of “Black” is pretty monolithic in this book, such that Dr. White appeared to be as surprised as were the Black Americans at the time, when Emperor Haile Selassie and other Ethiopian officials were more interested in being seen as loyal allies of the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s than in providing rhetorical support, let alone leadership, for the civil rights movement in the United States. Dr. White notes the other concerns of Ethiopian officials, such as international acceptance and attention to race issues nearer to home, especially in South Africa. That Ethiopians themselves saw race, here meaning racial solidarity, as only one component, potentially subordinate to others, of their national interest, suggests that the functioning of race was complex rather than simple in the construction of foreign relations.

I leave it to those more expert in African history to discuss how African politicians viewed their relationship with the global struggle for racial equality in the 1950s. I also found it intriguing, however, that race appears, in this study, to be synonymous with “Black” and “White.” At some levels that is appropriate. For American officials, the most potent emotions about race stemmed from the legal and cultural system of segregation, primarily against African Americans, in the United States. And, so far as I know, most Africans could be said to be either “Black” or “White.” So in the particular cases examined in this book, race does primarily boil down to Black and White.

The historical moment of this book, however, is African decolonization in the context of the Cold War. That moment was the culmination, in many ways, of DuBois’s so aptly evoked “problem of the color line.” By the time Eisenhower was elected in 1952, most nations of Asia had achieved independence or were actively fighting for it. From 1945 to the independence of Malaysia in 1957, the first tidal wave of twentieth-century decolonization occurred, with the Philippines, India, Burma, Pakistan, Indonesia, Vietnam (to some degree), Korea (again to some degree), Taiwan, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia moving from colonial to independent nation status. In each of these cases, including the Philippines, U.S. officials offered criticism of a racial nature of the early rulers and governments of the new nations. Asians were, in general, deemed unready to govern themselves, because they were too decadent, too emotional, too weak, too childlike, and insufficiently educated. Japanese and Chinese formed exceptions to a degree, but also were subjected to criticism and restrictions on sovereignty which had racial components. U.S. officials then brought not only their domestic racial understandings with them as they considered how to formulate policies toward the independent nations of Africa. They also brought with them at least a decade of experience in constructing relations with nations governed by people of color, exiting colonialism, and potentially unreliable or even hostile in the zero sum game of the

Cold War.

U.S. official concern about the challenge that a Patrice Lumumba posed to the American-led order, or to the unreliability of supposed ally Kwame Nkrumah, was expressed in terms similar to that about Ho Chi Minh and Sukarno. The similarity raises questions about the source of racial imaginings by U.S. officials. It seems to me a given that U.S. foreign policy has long been shaped by the personal racism of many American officials as well as the structural legacies of systems of governance and economics built on slavery and imperialism. The assumption of White privilege, another critical component of the idea of Whiteness as discussed by Dr. White, has pervaded the US foreign policy establishment. Would anyone today, in 2007, argue that US foreign policy was, or indeed is, color blind? I doubt it. Two questions therefore occur to me. First, what do we gain in our understanding of US foreign relations by Dr. White's particular focus on Whiteness and his use of critical race theory? The most compelling suggestion, for me, was Dr. White's observation that the Cold War itself provided racial sanctuary to US officials, challenged as they were by demands for racial equality both at home and overseas. The Cold War allowed them both to justify (to themselves, to critics) those small steps toward equality they were willing to make, as well as to hide within Cold War necessities from any serious dedication to change in race relations or civil rights law. This observation is intriguing, even compelling, but its specific implications are too little elaborated in the book.

A second question is how we can discern when race and especially racism made a difference, and what difference it made. Although Dr. White notes at several times that the policies pursued by U.S. officials were likely to, or even did, produce the opposite result from that desired, he does not demonstrate that U.S. officials believed they were pursuing a policy likely to produce the opposite of stated policy. American officials, sadly, pursued counter-productive policies in many parts of the world. When did they do this because they were blinded by Whiteness, and when did they do so because they were blinded by a perceived need for gold or uranium (South Africa), or for cocoa and alternate sources of aluminum (Ghana), or by the greater need to befriend Egypt than Ethiopia (Ethiopia), or by the irrationality of Cold War paranoia (Congo)? Foreign policy is of course complex, but Dr. White often provides us with many economic imperatives for the particular U.S. policy pursued, and, equally often, simple Cold War imperatives for the chosen policy. Whiteness, and the consequences that flow from it, were persistently present, but too often Whiteness was invoked by Dr. White, rather than explained as a cause of U.S. action.

The racism of American officials on display in this book is often appalling. An NSC report noted an apparently common belief that some Africans had "been out of the trees for only about fifty years." (p. 115) Evocations of the "primitive" nature of Africans were equally common. The assumption of White privilege also pervades the story told, not least in the casual assumption by US officials that Americans, with little cultural or historical knowledge of a country, knew better than the indigenous peoples what should be the structure of their government and economy. That particular hubris is apparently an American one, however, and pertains to many parts of the world, and not merely during

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the Cold War. The very ubiquity of racism and white privilege, however, make it difficult, and not much attempted in this book, to discern how to rank those with other issues that also shaped U.S. foreign policy.

Two possible ways of beginning to approach this issue of how to discern when it was the Cold War, when it was economic imperatives, and when it was race that provided primary impetus to a foreign policy decision or implementation occur to me. The first would be to compare these cases to ones in which race and White privilege functioned differently, in other countries ruled by people of a different skin color (and therefore a different racial history with white Americans). I kept thinking, as noted above, about comments about Ho Chi Minh and Sukarno, but also about Charles DeGaulle and Fidel Castro, just to name some obvious candidates. All of those leaders had qualities which frustrated and confounded U.S. officials, leading them to make colorful comments reflecting their own prejudices, whether racial, gendered, cultural, or of some other source. Asking for comparison, however, when Dr. White has already provided us with four in-depth case studies from across a large continent, seems churlish. The second approach, however, would acknowledge that Americans, even Americans in official capacity from the Department of State, did not newly arrive, upon independence, in African countries. Not only Ethiopia and Liberia would have had diplomatic representation from the United States prior to the 1950s; all the important trading partners and countries in strategic locations would have had U.S. consuls during the period of colonial rule as well. These consuls provided political analysis about independence movements and leaders and relations among colonial powers, as well as conducted economic relations that, as we well know, often were indistinguishable from political relations. U.S. officials did not receive blank slates labeled "Congo" or "Ghana" in the 1950s; they received box upon box of sometimes ill-informed, sometimes little-consulted, but often rich material.

U.S. scholars of the "Third World" and its relations with the United States during the early Cold War have mostly ignored this history, although that is beginning to change. It is the case that the level of reporting, interest, and contact increased after 1945, but it is also the case that the actors and policies often showed great continuity. In Indonesia, for example, Walter Foote had been U.S. consul in the 1920s and 1930s, and returned as a key player for the United States during the Indonesian Revolution, bringing with him his pro-Dutch sentiments as well as his confidence that he understood Indonesians because he knew a few of them and spoke Malay passingly well. Foote's reports from the interwar years shed light on the policies he pursued after World War II. Might this also have been the case for the African countries? Or, as also happened in Southeast Asia, did consuls to the French or British or Belgium countries who did well in the first decades of the twentieth century get rewarded, as it were, by a posting to Paris or London or Brussels? If so, did these career paths reinforce the pro-European tendencies of US foreign policy, or merely reflect them? Africa poses a slightly different possibility, as well, since the very small number of U.S. Foreign Service officers who were African-American in the 1920s and 1930s tended to be sent to Africa. Did those men play any role in shaping policy on the ground, or by the 1950s had they been marginalized in different ways?

Dr. White could well have incorporated this analysis into his work, which in each chapter traces the history of the country before the 1950s, focusing on indigenous efforts to rid themselves of European rule or influence. These narratives unfold without any sense that the United States had a presence during the years before 1950s. Given that he found the longer trajectory important in explaining the attitudes Africans carried into their perceptions of foreign relations in the 1950s, he might also have found a similar attention to U.S. attitudes and policies to have been helpful.

As a final note, and appropriately tacked on at the end, I was initially intrigued and even a little excited to see that Dr. White intended to consider the gender component of a set of foreign policy relations so obviously dramatically influenced by race. In each chapter, Dr. White methodically turned in the last two or three pages to the women of each country, noting that the traditions of that country apparently limited the powers and privileges of women, but that colonialism had worked also to undermine whatever rights and authority the women had had, and concluding by demonstrating ways in which the U.S. policy continued to exacerbate the declining status of women. The women often valiantly struggled to help their country gain independence, and to re-establish an honored and valued place for themselves. The tale is true enough and sad enough in each case, but the placement (at the tail end of the chapter, not integrated with the narrative that preceded), the brevity, and the near-uniformity of the history from places as diverse as Ethiopia, Ghana, Congo, and South Africa, served almost to undermine what I believe to have been an effort to demonstrate the ways in which international politics reached into the daily lives of women.

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