

## **Book Review: Engaging Africa: Washington and the Fall of Portugal's Colonial Empire**

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Witney W. Schneidman. *Engaging Africa: Washington and the Fall of Portugal's Colonial Empire*. New York: University Press of America, 2004. 312 pp. \$33.00 (paper).

Decolonization in Africa was a difficult issue for the United States, creating, as a Department of State study once noted, an "embarrassing choice between security requirements and basic political principle" (quoted at p. 5). On the one hand, there was America's own anti-colonial tradition and belief in self-determination. On the other hand, there was its alliance with and deference to leading European colonial powers, plus the need for their cooperation in the Cold War. Further complicating these issues was the American fear that "premature independence" for African colonies, to use a phrase popular in the Eisenhower administration, would result in weak and unstable regimes susceptible to communist manipulation, but that failure to work toward independence also created opportunities for radicals.

This book illustrates these dilemmas by examining America's relations with Portugal and its colonies in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau in the 1960s and 1970s. Primary attention is devoted to the first two of those colonies; Guinea-Bissau is probably mentioned only because a prominent Portuguese general there, Antonio de Spínola, played an important role in the 1974 events that were to lead to Portugal finally granting independence. No mention is made of Portugal's other colonial holdings in Africa, Cape Verde and Sao Tome and Principe. American policy toward Portugal and its African colonies has not received a lot of attention, despite the fact that this case constitutes not only "one of the most important episodes in Africa's decolonization experience," but also, from the perspective of American foreign policy, one of the "most tragic" (pp. xv, 225). One likely reason for the oversight is diminished Portuguese influence in Europe and Africa by the 1960s. Moreover, when world attention began to focus on white-ruled territories in southern Africa, most was directed at South Africa rather than the Portuguese colonies there. This book corrects that oversight, providing an interesting and thorough account of American policy toward a changing reality in both Portugal and its African colonies during the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon years. The author served as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Africa in the Clinton administration and has also worked in and on Africa for the World Bank and several consulting firms.

Schneidman begins his study in 1960 with the arrival at the United Nations of fifteen new African states and arrival in the White House of John F. Kennedy soon after. At the outset of his term, Kennedy modified traditional American attitudes of deference to European colonial powers and skepticism about African liberation movements in favor of ones aimed at promoting colonial self-determination. Specifically with respect to Portugal's colonies, the U.S. began to apply more pressure on Portugal and more support for those contesting its rule. It supported several Security Council resolutions in the Spring of 1961 that called upon Portugal to move toward self-determination. At the same time, the United States supported dissident Portuguese military officers plotting a coup in 1961 against the dictatorship of Antonio Oliveira Salazar. Assistance was also extended to the liberation movements in Portugal's colonies, with Holden Roberto in Angola and Eduardo Mondlane in Mozambique receiving covert aid. In sum, the United States had begun to resolve the "embarrassing choice" identified previously largely in favor of political principle.

The change did not last. By 1963 American policy had begun to revert to the traditional approach, e.g., it no longer supported UN resolutions calling for self-determination and had distanced itself from Roberto and Mondlane. While Schneidman provides a chronological narrative, his book is also valuable for depicting reasons why the United States often failed to act in support of the principle of self-determination. Most important were security considerations, i.e., the other side of that "embarrassing choice." Over time, the Kennedy (and, later, Johnson and Nixon administrations) "concluded that the price of inducing Lisbon to grant self-determination in Africa was not worth the costs of a breakdown in the bilateral relationship" (p. 74). The most obvious security issue in this case was Portugal's control of the Azores Islands, and its agreement to allow the United States access to an air base there, a base once described by Dean Acheson as "perhaps the single most important...we have anywhere" (quoted at p. 5). The scheduled expiration of that lease on 31 December 1962 required that the Kennedy administration become less assertive about Portugal's African colonies. When the Portuguese refused to renew the agreement, instead allowing it to continue on a "day-to-day" basis (for the next nine years), their leverage was heightened. At other times, the U.S. had to worry that Portugal might withdraw from NATO as France's Charles de Gaulle had. More broadly, Johnson became preoccupied with Vietnam and Nixon with superpower relations.

Compared to these issues, Africa and Portugal's colonial territories there were usually deemed as relatively unimportant. Dean Rusk, Kennedy's Secretary of State, noted in his memoirs that "Africa was not high on my list of priorities" (quoted at p. 57). Tapley Bennet, American ambassador to Portugal in the mid-1960s, met regularly with Johnson while on home leave but never remembered any discussion of the situation in Portugal's colonies. Nixon's administration concentrated on superpower detente to such an extent that the "problems of Portugal and Portuguese Africa attracted virtually no attention" (p. 107). Bureaucratic factors reflected these priorities and also strengthened them. Africanists within the Kennedy administration gradually lost their influence to the Pentagon and Europeanists in the State Department as American policy shifted between 1961–63. Most had left government by 1967. Over time, according to one State Department Africa expert, "individuals possessing Africa expertise...had less influence than those interested in selling planes, buying chrome or in renewing contracts" (quoted at p. 118). Kissinger was famous for his disdain of the Africa Bureau, regarding it as one of the "backwaters" of the policy process, where officials "tended to promulgate a rather inflexible version of Wilsonianism" rather than viewing issues through his realist lense (p. 193).

Yet another factor was that the Portuguese were stubborn, difficult to deal with, and actively resisted American initiatives. Salazar was so stubborn that one American observer argued he would not accept a reform program for the colonies "without the benefit of a frontal lobotomy" (quoted at p. 47). Even after the renewal of the base agreement in 1971, to cite another example, Portugal proved difficult, hesitating to allow the U.S. to use it to resupply Israel during 1973 Arab-Israeli war. American officials did not know how to overcome such intransigence. Kennedy had first tried to exert pressure but later eased off. Both the Johnson and Nixon administrations relied more on carrots than sticks, Nixon going so far as to tell the Portuguese foreign minister that "I'll never do to you what Kennedy did" (quoted at p. 112).

Furthering undermining any impulse to assume a more active role was the widespread American belief that the political and military situation in Portugal's colonies was at a stalemate, meaning that any American involvement would not alter the situation there while also angering the Portuguese. Such thinking was reflected most clearly in the conclusions of a 1969 National Security document that the "Whites are here to stay and the only way that constructive change can come is through them. There is no hope for the blacks to gain the political rights they seek through violence..." (quoted at p. 118).

But the whites were not to stay, in Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia, or, ultimately, South Africa. Portugal's 1974 "revolution of red carnations" brought to power a government committed to dismantling its colonial empire. The United States remained largely indifferent to this process at the outset, even as the Angolan parties negotiated and then

quickly violated an accord aimed at establishing independence. It manifested more concern with the political maneuverings in Lisbon and the prospect that the Portuguese Communist Party might come to power. Only the March 1975 Soviet decision to provide military assistance to the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the insertion of superpower politics into southern Africa prompted a more active American policy. Thus, its "one-time" payment of \$300,000 to Roberto's Front for the National Liberation of Angola (FNLA) in early 1975 was followed by two payments, of \$8 million and \$6 million, in July and another \$10 million was agreed to in August. Also in August, funds were provided to Jonas Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) for the first time. By then, many outsiders were jumping into Angola, including South Africa and, most importantly, Cuba. The dispatch of Cuban combat troops and nearly \$500 million in Soviet military assistance enabled the MPLA to gain control of Luanda, the Angolan capital and to be the government nominally in power at the time of Angola's independence in November 1975. The American decision to provide covert funds to several Angolan parties was a comprehensive failure: it had not dissuaded the Soviets from providing even greater assistance to their Angolan client, it had not prevented the MPLA from winning sufficient power to gain recognition from many African states after November 1975, and it had further encouraged the Congress to cut back on executive power. Schneidman argues, as did many at the time, that a better approach would have been to avoid becoming involved in Angola, because of congressional hostility, Roberto's weaknesses, and the absence of any other allies in Angola.

Schneidman relates these details well and his book adds to our understanding of American policy toward European colonial powers and their colonies as well as the dilemma between political principle and American security interests. His chapters on American policy toward Portuguese Africa are informative. Less relevant is the extensive discussion of the Portuguese revolution. While clearly important for Portugal and Portuguese Africa, politics in Lisbon are given too much attention. All major actors there were committed to granting independence, they disagreed only about the timing, so there is little need to detail the complicated political changes going on in the Portuguese capital. The author might also have devoted more time to defending his decision to focus on Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. The selection of the first two is obvious, as these were the two largest and most important of Portugal's African colonies. But why Guinea-Bissau? If Guinea-Bissau is included in the analysis, why not Cape Verde? One final criticism should be directed at the editor. There are several spelling errors, e.g., the Angolan capital is spelled "Launda" on page 50, and the table of contents listing for chapter three includes an "endnotes" section, even though three chapters remain in the text and the endnotes only appear at the end.