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James H. Meriwether's Tears, Fire, and Blood: The United States and the Decolonization of Africa

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James H. Meriwether, *Tears, Fire, and Blood: The United States and the Decolonization of Africa* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), pp.301

Adeniyi S. Basiru

Contrary to what many, including this reviewer, might have assumed, the United States' engagements with Africa predated post-colonial Africa. In *Tears, Fire, and Blood: The United States and the Decolonization of Africa*, James H. Meriwether, a Professor of History at California State University, Channel Islands, attempts, in a comprehensive style, to historicize US-African relations, during the decolonization and post-colonial epochs of Africa's political evolution. To be sure, the 301-page book seeks to lay bare the variegated factors and actors that shaped the dynamics of the US' engagements with Africa for *circa* five decades.

Organizationally, Meriwether partitions his book into six thematically and organically arranged chapters, including an introduction and a short epilogue. In the introductory part of the book, the author, robustly, attempts to x-ray the issues that laid the foundation for Washington's foray into the African diplomatic arena, especially during the dying phase of colonialism. During this era, the US, having emerged as a superpower, was in a monumental diplomatic dilemma on how to respond to Africa's anti-colonial demands and also satisfying the interests of her European allies. In the author's words, "as colonial empires in Africa were challenged and confronted collapse, the United States found itself pulled towards diametrically opposed poles: waxing African anticolonial nationalists seeking majority rule and support for independence, and European anticommunist allies wanting to maintain their continuing (white) rule."¹ Despite this dilemma, Meriwether canvasses the position that authorities in Washington, having been swayed by the positions of anthropologists and diplomats that had visited Africa, insisted that Africa was not ready to join the league of independent countries. By this position, Washington supported the continuation of the status quo (colonial rule), despite the pressures for complete decolonization, emanating from the black American community in the US.

In the first chapter captioned, "No Premature Independence, 1941–1951," Meriwether chronicles events that shaped the contours of decolonization in Africa and the US authorities'

responses to them. Building on the arguments in the introduction, the author argues that, despite increasing momentum of anti-colonial struggles in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World, in the aftermath of WWII, the US authorities refused to forcefully push her European allies to divest themselves from the colonies. Although increasing technical aid to Africa, especially during the Truman administration, heightened the suspicion between the US and Western allies, the threat posed by communism harmonized US' interests with those of her allies. To be sure, what could be gleaned from Meriwether in chapter one is that Washington was, diplomatically, against premature independence to African colonies in the early 1950s, due mainly to fear of communists' take-over. As he puts it, "concerns about communism and strategic minerals consistently outweighed ideals such as self-determination and majority rule."²

The focus of the book in chapter two is the transition in the American approach to Africa's decolonization between 1952 and 1960. By 1952, the Eisenhower administration's policy was anchored on supporting the status quo: continuation of colonial rule in Africa. In Meriwether's words, "in Africa, Eisenhower was more comfortable with the security of white minority despite the obvious iniquities."³ In the late 1950s, however, with the independence of Ghana in 1957, coupled with increasing tempo of black civil rights agitations in the US, as well as the unprecedented spread of communism, the administration was forced to re-adjust its approach. Notwithstanding the adjustment, the issues of European colonialism and white minority rule in Southern Africa were still not formally addressed. Rather, the administration supported increasing educational aid to Africa. As the author notes, "educational assistance seemed to provide a daily double of positives: a way to advance American values and a way for the Eisenhower administration to indicate support for Africans without overly challenging idea of European rule."⁴

In the third chapter titled, "Years of Africa, 1960–1966", Meriwether does not only highlight the changes that occurred in Africa, in a period of six years, but also examines the changing policy of the US. Focusing mainly on the administration of President J.F Kennedy, the author argues, persuasively, that in spite of the increasing educational and cultural contacts, facilitated by the Kennedy's administration, coupled with the fact that many

African countries have yanked off colonial rule; yet, Washington was still hobnobbing, albeit diplomatically, with white minority regimes in Southern Africa, as well as Portuguese rule in Africa. This stance was informed by the erstwhile policy of not injuring the interests of strategic allies against communism. Indeed, where the administration initially took a pro-African stance against Pretoria and Lisbon, it eventually backed down, due to strategic calculations. Putting this in context, Meriwether writes, “within a year of adopting a firmer position against Portuguese colonialism, Portuguese intransigence and American need for access to Azores caused the Kennedy administration to step back. Its public criticisms of Portuguese colonialism faded and its contact with Angolan nationalists diminished.”⁵

In the fourth chapter of the book titled, “The White Redoubt, 1965–1974,” the author attempts to bring to fore how the various administrations in Washington, between 1965 and 1974, handled the issue of white minority regimes in South Africa, Rhodesia, Angola and Mozambique. Given the wider condemnations that the activities of the minority regimes in Southern Africa had attracted, Washington was in a great dilemma, notes the author. While attempting to dance to the tunes of the United Nations (UN) which had imposed sanctions on these racist regimes, Washington could not, at the same time, come hard on them, given the strategic importance of their countries to the US. Especially Rhodesia, the administration of President Richard Nixon factored US’ strategic interests in the Chrome mineral sector in Rhodesia. Thus, the administration, in pleasing the domestic business community interested in chrome importation from Rhodesia, defied UN’s sanction against Rhodesia and thereby sacrificing the interests of Africa. As the author notes, “although Washington tried to portray its decisions as favorable to the African majorities, its strategic choices typically continued a US approach enabling a status quo that favored the white minority in the parts of Africa still not free.”⁶

Meriwether’s chapter five, robustly, navigates the roles of the US in seeing to the end of the last vestiges of minority rule in Africa. The author notes that the changing realities of the 1970s, coupled with the increasing involvement of the Soviet Union and Cuba in Southern Africa, as well as the exit of Portugal in Africa, forced the administrations in Washington to re-calibrate

US policy on minority rule in Southern Africa. The combination of these factors eventually forced the administration of President Jimmy Carter to push for majority rule in Rhodesia, a development which was a major shift in US African policy. In his words, “for more than a generation of decision-making, when offered the perceived security of continuing white control, leaders in Washington had felt a gravitational pull to that pole. Here, clearly and unequivocally, Carter had gone the other way.”⁷⁷

Meriwether’s preoccupation in the sixth and last chapter of the book would appear to be the unraveling of the intrigues and politics that characterized the exit of the very last vestige of racial colonialism in Africa vis: minority rule in Namibia and South Africa. The author submits that between 1980 and 1994, the administrations in Washington, especially the Reagan administration, in spite of the tremendous pressures from the domestic and international bodies, following the increasing repressions by the racist regime in Pretoria, were reluctant to take a tough stance. For instance, the Reagan Doctrine-Constructive Engagement-remarks Meriwether, seeks to “bring changes through friendly persuasion and helpful support of a strategic ally, rather than through harsh condemnation and punitive sanctions.”⁷⁸ This strategy, notwithstanding, the wind of change, across the globe, forced a change of policy in Washington, leading to the independence of Namibia in 1990 and the end of apartheid in 1994. By a way of an addendum, Meriwether, in the epilogue part of the book, seeks to provide answers to the inevitable poser of why the US, despite its history of anti-colonial struggles, was aloof to the struggles for self-determination in Africa, during the period under study. Pointedly, the author answers, “US policy-which prioritized Cold War concerns, European alliances, and economic interests-made it a harder road to freedom and more difficult to overcome the resistance to treating Africans . . . as equal partners.”⁷⁹

Overall, Meriwether’s timely book is a worthy contribution to the burgeoning literature on the US-African international relations. Each of the chapters, chronologically arranged, chronicles, in a logical style, events, actors and institutions that shaped US foreign policy in Africa, for circa five decades. Another beauty of the book is the author’s efforts in identifying the contributions of the black community in the US, during the struggles of Africans to decolonize and deracialize governments in Africa. Of

course, Meriwether's book is not without a lacuna. The theoretical footing of the book, being academic literature, is not established. This could have been done by the author in the introduction of the book. Since the behavior of Washington in Africa, during the period covered in the book, was motivated by US "Strategic interests"; a theoretical framework that captures such attitude, could have been teased out by the author, in the early part of the book.

In sum, *Tears, Blood, and Fire* is a historically grounded masterpiece that would be of great relevance to the academic community. It should be a pocket companion to students of History, Political Science, International Relations and African Studies as well as those interested in US-African relations.

Notes

¹ James H. Meriwether, *Tears, Fire, and Blood: The United States and the Decolonization of Africa* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 4

² *ibid*, 55.

³ *ibid*, 64.

⁴ *ibid*, 80.

⁵ *ibid*, 116.

⁶ *ibid*, 138.

⁷ *ibid*, 204.

⁸ *ibid*, 216.

⁹ *ibid*, 238.

