

LET US FORGET UNPLEASANT MEMORIES: THE US STATE DEPARTMENT'S ANALYSIS OF THE CONGO CRISIS

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The President [Eisenhower] expressed his wish that Lumumba would fall into a river full of crocodiles; [British Foreign Minister] Lord Home said regretfully that we have lost many of the techniques of old-fashioned diplomacy.

– Ibid. p. 495.

In the Fall of 1960, two CIA officials were asked by their superiors to assassinate Lumumba.

– US Senate, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders: interim report* (Washington, DC, 1975), p. 4.

The cold war was brought to the nations south of the Sahara during the Congo crisis, which marked one of the most disorderly and least successful cases of decolonisation, when the superpowers, especially the United States, began to play a major rôle in African affairs. Hence the importance of examining the recent collection of declassified documents, edited and published by the State Department, which contains reprinted materials from several government agencies pertaining to US–African relations from 1958 to 1960. Judging from the information that has been omitted, however, it seems clear that some US officials still feel ill at ease with America's involvement in the Congo crisis.

Africa has long been a neglected part of *The Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) series, often merged with other areas of the world, usually the Near East or South Asia, thereby reflecting the relatively low level of attention that US policy-makers accorded the continent.¹ Totalling over 800 pages and covering a vitally important period of African history, Vol. 14 is the first published collection of American documents pertaining to the independent Congo, as well as US policy towards other countries, especially Ghana, Guinea, and South Africa. It contains little that cannot be found in such repositories as the Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene, Kansas, or the National Archives in Washington, DC, and some specialists in diplomacy may not learn a great deal that they do not already know. But the main purpose of the FRUS series is to make existing information more accessible, and the 1958–60 volume is likely to be of particular interest to those analysts of the Congo crisis who have long had to rely heavily on Belgian materials.²

¹ For useful surveys of the evolution of American thinking with regard to Africa, see Martin Staniland, *American Intellectuals and African Nationalists, 1955–1970* (Cambridge, 1991), and Peter J. Schraeder, 'Reviewing the Study of US Policy Towards Africa: from intellectual "backwater" to theory construction', in *Third World Quarterly: journal of emerging areas* (Abingdon), 14, 4, November 1993, pp. 775–86.

² See Jules Gérard-Libois and Benoît Verhaegen (eds.), *Congo, 1960*, Vols. 1 and 2 (Brussels, 1961), and Institut royal des relations internationales, *La Crise congolaise: janvier 1959–août 1960* (Brussels, n.d.).

Given that the US State Department is responsible for the FRUS series, they may be expected to emphasise documents that reflect favourably on American foreign policy. This problem became acute during the 1980s, when there was a considerable increase in government secrecy, concomitant with intensified official efforts to influence public opinion.³ Nevertheless, the editors boast about the reliability of their publication:

The source text [of the original documents] is reproduced as exactly as possible, including marginalia or other notations, which are described in the footnotes. Obvious typographical errors are corrected, but other mistakes and omissions in the source text are corrected by bracketed insertions: a correction is set in italic type; an addition in roman type... The amount of material not declassified has been noted by indicating the number of lines or pages of source text that were omitted (p. viii)

The editors concede that certain sections have been excised because they remain classified for security reasons, but claim that these constitute only '0.38 percent of the manuscript as originally compiled' (p. ix). Above all, they emphasise that 'The *Foreign Relations* series is guided by the principles of historical objectivity and accuracy'. In addition, 'the published record should omit no facts that were of major importance in reaching a decision', and crucially, 'nothing should be omitted for the purposes of concealing a defect in policy' (p. iii).

Foreign Intervention in the Congo

The most serious defect in Vol. 14 is that it makes almost no mention of US efforts to assassinate Patrice Lumumba. This attempt to expunge unpleasant details from the record is ineffectual, since the plots are thoroughly documented in the report of the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,⁴ which provides some 78 pages of relevant information, including testimony from former officials, as well as extended quotations from Central Intelligence Agency documents, especially cables between the CIA headquarters in Washington, DC, and its Congo station in Léopoldville.

Although Lumumba was assassinated in January 1961, according to the Senate's report, 'The poisons intended for use against Patrice Lumumba were never administered to him, and there is no evidence that the United States was in any way involved in Lumumba's death at the hands of his Congolese enemies'.⁵ Such a conclusion does not follow from the evidence, since many of Lumumba's 'Congolese enemies' were in fact working for the CIA,⁶ including

³ American Library Association, *Less Access to Less Information By and About the U.S. Government: a 1981-1987 chronology* (Washington, DC, 1988); Lotte E. Feinberg, 'Managing the Freedom of Information Act and Federal Information Policy: the Reagan years', in *Government Information Quarterly* (Greenwich, CT), 6, 4, 1989, pp. 345-64; and Frederick M. Kaiser, 'The Amount of Classified Information: causes, consequences, and correctives of a growing concern', in *ibid.* 6, 3, 1989, pp. 247-66. On the theoretical significance of secrecy, see David N. Gibbs, 'Secrecy and International Relations', in *Journal of Peace Research* (London), 32, 3, 1995.

⁴ See US Senate, *op. cit.* 1975, ch. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 256. A similar conclusion is reached by Piero Gleijeses, "'Flee! The White Giants are Coming": the United States, the Mercenaries, and the Congo, 1964-65', in *Diplomatic History* (Wilmington, DE), 18, 2, 1994, p. 209.

⁶ Stephen R. Weissman, *American Foreign Policy in the Congo, 1960-1964* (Ithaca and London, 1974), pp. 88-99.

General Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, who played a key rôle in his death.⁷ Unlike the Senate, most researchers have left open the possibility that the CIA was responsible for causing the Congo leader's death.⁸ But there is general agreement among all sources about one fact: the CIA certainly *plotted* to assassinate Lumumba.

How does Vol. 14 present the available evidence? The index contains one entry with 'Lumumba assassination plots' as a sub-category (p. 767), but the two pages listed in the text only discuss *Congolese* plots to kill Lumumba. Indeed, the only reference to the well documented American plots is confined entirely to a footnote, which reads in part:

[National Security Council staffer Robert] Johnson testified on June 18, 1975, before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. He stated his recollection that at an NSC meeting during the summer of 1960, 'President Eisenhower said something - I can no longer remember his words - that came across to me as an order for the assassination of Lumumba...' Johnson stated that this was his impression at the time but that, in retrospect he was uncertain whether this was an accurate reading of the President's meaning; both [Under-Secretary of State C. Douglas] Dillon and [NSC staffer Marion W.] Boggs testified before the Committee that they did not recall such a statement by the President. The only other NSC meeting during the summer of 1960 at which the Congo was discussed and at which both Eisenhower and Johnson were present was on September 7, but Johnson's memorandum of that meeting records no comment by the President concerning the Congo (p. 421fn).

From this it appears that a hazy statement by a single individual was contradicted by other sources, and that this was the only evidence of assassination uncovered by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

In fact, although this authoritative 1975 report cites extensive evidence that the CIA had been attempting to assassinate Lumumba, virtually all of this is omitted from the FRUS volume,⁹ including the testimony of the CIA's former Africa Division Chief, Bronson Tweedy, who recounted conversations with Richard Bissell, Deputy Director for Operations:

What Mr. Bissell was saying to me was that there was agreement, policy agreement in Washington, that Lumumba must be removed from the position of control and influence in the Congo... and that among the possibilities of that elimination was indeed assassination.¹⁰

⁷ Regarding CIA support for Mobutu, see Rejashwar Dayal, *Mission for Hammar skjöld* (Delhi, 1976), p. 66; Madeleine Kalb, *The Congo Cables: the cold war in Africa from Eisenhower to Kennedy* (New York, 1982), p. 96; René Lemarchand, 'The C.I.A. in Africa: How Central? How Intelligent?', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Cambridge), 14, 3, September 1976, p. 413; and Weissman, op. cit. p. 95.

⁸ Richard Mahoney, *JFK: ordeal in Africa* (New York, 1983), p. 71; William Minter, 'The Limits of Liberal Africa Policy: lessons from the Congo crisis', in *TransAfrica Forum* (New Brunswick), 2, 3, 1984, pp. 33-4; Michael G. Schatsberg, *Mobutu or Chaos?* (Lanham, MD, 1991), pp. 21-26; and Kalb, op. cit. p. 189.

⁹ However, the preface to the FRUS volume discusses records of the Senate investigation and includes this (rather non-committal) comment: 'These records did not, however, include material concerning the planning and preparation for the possible assassination of Patrice Lumumba described in the *Interim Report* of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which was based on interviews and on CIA documents that the Agency had made available to the Committee' (p. vii).

¹⁰ US Senate, op. cit. 1975, p. 20.

Further evidence of assassination was provided by Victor Hedgeman, a former CIA officer,¹¹ who stated that he had been authorised to 'eliminate Lumumba'. Senate investigators asked for clarification on this point:

[Question]: By eliminate do you mean assassinate?

Hedgeman: Yes, I would say that was...my understanding of the primary means. I don't think it was probably limited to that, if there was some other way of...removing him [Lumumba] from a position of political threat.¹²

Such revelations about what was being planned explain why the Congo section of the Senate report begins by stating: 'The Committee has received solid evidence of a [US] plot to assassinate Patrice Lumumba'.¹³ As for possible presidential involvement:

The chain of events revealed by the documents and testimony is strong enough to permit a reasonable inference that the plot to assassinate Lumumba was authorized by President Eisenhower. Nevertheless there is enough countervailing testimony by Eisenhower Administration officials and enough ambiguity and lack of clarity in the records of high-level policy meetings to preclude the committee from making a finding that the President intended an assassination effort against Lumumba.¹⁴

The FRUS volume also fails to document the extensive and historically important CIA cables that were quoted in the Senate report. I could find only one exception. An editorial note cites a telegram from Allen Dulles, the CIA Director, to the Congo station that only hinted at assassination: 'We wish [to] give every possible support in eliminating Lumumba' (p. 503). Despite testimony that the word 'eliminate' was a euphemism for 'assassinate', the evidence is absent from the FRUS volume. This note refers to the source of the Dulles message as the *Interim Report* of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, as if the State Department could only bring itself to mention the sub-title of *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*.

One gets the impression that the FRUS editors sought to portray a benign image of US policy in the Congo. But such efforts sometimes yield misleading results. For example, an American embassy document, dated December 1960, described the imprisonment of Lumumba and observed:

We have consistently advised all participants against violence and inhumane treatment and continue to do so. It must however be understood that in the Congo what passes as inhumane to U.S. [citizens] is customary among them. Thus the abuse of Lumumba shocks civilized countries while Congolese themselves consider he is pampered. Fact is he is much better treated than any other prisoner has been to best our knowledge. Mobutu continues to assert he will be tried in a proper court with legal safeguards (p. 617).

This passage implied that US officials were concerned about Lumumba's safety, and that they had only limited influence with the Congolese captors who were, in any case, not treating him too badly. But the fact is that Lumumba was murdered some six weeks later, and it is safe to assume that those Americans who had sought to kill him for months were pleased.

¹¹ According to Sean Kelly, *America's Tyrant. The CIA and Mobutu of Zaïre* (Washington, DC, 1993), p. 57, 'Victor Hedgeman' is actually a pseudonym for Lawrence Devlin, who gained considerable notoriety for his rôle in Congo covert operations.

¹² US Senate, op. cit. 1975, p. 24. Note that both ellipses were in the original.

¹³ Ibid. p. 13.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 263.

There seems little doubt that the Congo was targeted by one of the largest covert operations in the history of the CIA, and its significance has been noted repeatedly by former officers,¹⁵ as well as by scholars.¹⁶ Americans in both the CIA station and the embassy directly intervened in Congolese affairs, bribing parliamentarians, setting up special units of the military, and promoting the career of General Mobutu. In addition to any assassination plots, it is well documented that the United States played an important rôle in two efforts to overthrow Lumumba, both in September 1960.

As regards indirect US intervention, the FRUS history indicates that the United Nations peacekeeping force was working very closely with American officials and acted, at least in the first two months, as a conduit for US influence. The UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, frequently conferred with American officials, and noted their hostility towards Lumumba (pp. 465 and 485).¹⁷ It is even possible to find hints of direct US intervention – for example, when the National Security Council discussed a move by the Congo's President, Joseph Kasavubu, to dismiss Lumumba as Prime Minister, the CIA Director analysed the situation as follows:

Kasavubu's move to throw out Lumumba had been undertaken without adequate planning... [and] had produced consternation among his aides and advisors who had planned it for two days later. Mr. Dulles observed that it was not easy to run a coup in the Congo... Lumumba's ability to influence the Congolese people... was greater than that of Kasavubu (pp. 460–1).

Given the extensive evidence compiled through archival and interview sources by the Senate investigation, as well as by the academic works cited above, there can be little doubt that the various US interventions during 1958–60 have been understated by the State Department editors.

Although the significance of anti-communism in the Congo crisis has long been a source of scholarly disagreement,¹⁸ there is general consensus that it played a major rôle in the formulation of US policy. In the FRUS volume, a number of documents reveal superpower rivalry in the Congo and confirm that anti-communism was very much on the minds of the US policy-makers. The Soviet bloc undoubtedly intervened in the crisis and, at its high point in August and September, sent trucks, transport planes, and several hundred

¹⁵ See panel discussion by William Colby and John Stockwell et al., 'Should the U.S. Fight Secret Wars?', in *Harpers* (New York), September 1984, p. 36.

¹⁶ Numerous studies document US intervention in the Congo: Weissman, op. cit. 1974; Lemarchand, loc. cit. 1976; Stephen R. Weissman, 'CIA Covert Action in Zaire and Angola: patterns and consequences', in *Political Science Quarterly* (New York), 94, 2, 1979, pp. 263–86; Kalb, op. cit. 1982; Mahoney, op. cit. 1983; L. B. Ekpebu, *Zaire and the African Revolution* (Ibadan, 1989); Schatzberg, op. cit. 1991; David N. Gibbs, *The Political Economy of Third World Intervention: mines, money, and U.S. policy in the Congo crisis* (Chicago, 1991); Kelly, op. cit. 1993; and Peter J. Schraeder, *United States Foreign Policy Toward Africa: incrementalism, crisis and change* (Cambridge, 1994), ch. 3.

¹⁷ For new evidence on UN involvement in the Congo, see Carole Collins, 'Fatally Flawed Mediation: Cordier and the Congo crisis of 1960', in *Africa Today* (Denver), 39, 3, 1992, pp. 5–22.

¹⁸ Early studies of the Congo viewed anti-communism as virtually the sole objective of US foreign policy. See, for example, Ernest W. Lefever, *Crisis in the Congo: a United Nations force in action* (Washington, DC, 1965) and Crawford Young, *Politics in the Congo: decolonization and independence* (Princeton, 1965). However, later studies accepted that other motives, including economic interests, may have been influential as well.

advisers to aid Lumumba.¹⁹ But it would be a mistake for readers to conclude that the USSR intervened heavily in the Congo and the United States very little or not at all.

The trouble is that one-sided presentation of evidence distorts the historical record. In one document, the US Ambassador to the Congo, Clare Timberlake, explicitly denied reports 'that Kasavubu and Mobutu are in U.S. hands' (p. 628), when in fact both were being substantially influenced by the CIA, with Mobutu receiving cash payments.²⁰ He recalled stating that 'No power, whether great or small had right to inject itself in internal affairs of Congo and this is U.S. policy' (p. 504), even though the United States was itself intervening on a large scale. And the Under-Secretary of State, Douglas Dillon, is earlier cited as condemning external efforts to influence events in the Congo: 'we believe intervention practiced by Africans is just as contrary to U.N. resolutions as would be interference from any other source' (p. 502). The FRUS volume implies that the United States did not intervene in the Congo by avoiding evidence to the contrary.

Conclusion

Sigmund Freud noted in an essay on dream censorship that people do not suppress memories randomly but, on the contrary, mainly those of events that are awkward or painful.²¹ Perhaps the same can be said of Vol. 14, which seems to erase some very unpleasant memories about American involvement in the Congo, thereby presenting a misleading account of what happened. It is unreliable about the substance of US foreign policy in the Congo crisis. ~~To be sure, this State Department publication does include some vivid descriptions of American perceptions, as well as a good discussion of intervention by the United Nations. And it is particularly interesting as an indicator of the mind-set of American officials, and how they would like to view the history of US relations with Africa.~~²²

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¹⁹ Gibbs, op. cit. pp. 94–5 and 99–100.

²⁰ Weissman, op. cit. pp. 88–99.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1975 edn), p. 146.

²² It should be noted that the criticised omissions in Vol. 14 are part of a larger problem with the State Department's historical project more generally. See Bruce Kuniholm and Roger Dingaman, 'Historians Say Secrecy Distorts Foreign Policy Chronicle', in *The Washington Post*, 16 April 1990, and Warren Cohen, 'At the State Dept., Historygate', in *The New York Times*, 8 May 1990.