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REVIEW ARTICLE

MISREPRESENTING THE CONGO CRISIS

DAVID N GIBBS

'I did that', says my memory. 'I could not have done that', says my pride
... Eventually—the memory yields.

Friedrich Nietzsche

A MAJOR ISSUE in recent studies of the Congo Crisis has been the nature and extent of US intervention. While scholars have achieved some measure of consensus on the substantial scope of US intervention in the Congo, American government officials, in contrast, still prefer to evade the question of intervention, and such evasions are evident in a recent State Department publication, *The Foreign Relations of the United States: 1961–63, Volume XX: Congo Crisis*.¹ This essay, shows that the State Department editors omitted vital information from this volume, suppressed details concerning US intervention, and generally provided a misleading account of the Congo Crisis.

The book under review is one volume of the familiar State Department historical project, the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*. This series comprises documents from various agencies of the US government, including the Department of State, CIA, Treasury, Defence, Executive Office of the President, and National Security Council, which have been declassified over the years. The documents in the *Foreign Relations* volumes have been evaluated by government archivists, edited, typeset, and published with annotations that explain the significance of various persons and events. These have been published in numerous volumes, which collectively comprise the *FRUS* series. Recent releases in the series have generated some negative comment from scholars; a recent volume on Iran, for example, was termed 'a fraud, a gross distortion of American involvement'.² A consistent criticism has been that the *FRUS* series avoids information that reflects negatively on US foreign policy and, in particular, omits unflattering information concerning US interventions abroad.

These problems are present in the *FRUS* history of Congo Crisis of 1961–63, which virtually excludes any discussion of US covert

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1. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–63, Volume XX: Congo Crisis*, (Government Printing Office, Washington, DC.: 1994).

2. Comments by Warren I. Cohen, 'At the State Dept., Historygate', *The New York Times*, 8 May, 1990, p. 29.

operations. Key events in the Congo Crisis are thus distorted. There is only one explicit reference to US covert action in the Congo during this period. An Editorial Note mentions a memorandum, dated 10 June 1961, from National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy to President John F. Kennedy, and it reads in part:

we are arranging a meeting at which all of our clandestine activities in support of political leaders and parties will be discussed with you. In particular, at that meeting, there will be presented a proposal for action in the Congo which has the support of the ambassador and our Department of State . . . one small aspect of this Congo proposal has been presented with an urgency . . . This is an expenditure of \$23,000 in support of particular activities designed to strengthen the moderate camp in the Congo. *Very much larger sums have been spent* [emphasis added] in the past in the same direction (p.144).

This passage raises more questions than it answers. It indicates that US officials spent far more than \$23,000 to influence Congolese politics, but it does not specify the actual sum, nor does it provide any specifics about how this money was spent or what effect the expenditures may have had. In any case, the *Foreign Relations* history clearly acknowledges that the USA was intervening—but the entire discussion of this topic is confined to one-half page of text. The nearly 900 other pages of source text contain no further discussion of covert action.

Perhaps the most glaring distortion concerns the circumstances leading to the murder of the Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, who died in January 1961. The extensive CIA plots to murder Lumumba have been exhaustively documented in the published report of the Senate Select Committee on intelligence in 1975,³ and this report has aroused considerable interest among Congo specialists; the *Foreign Relations* collection, however, makes only a fleeting mention of the Senate committee's findings, in an Editorial Note, which summarizes the Senate report as follows: 'in spite of CIA activities in late 1960 aimed at bringing about Lumumba's demise [emphasis added], CIA representatives in the Congo were not involved in Lumumba's death . . .' (p. 18). The *FRUS* history fails to acknowledge here (or anywhere else) one of the central conclusions of the Senate investigation: CIA officers not only sought Lumumba's 'demise,' they also sought to kill him. It should be noted that most students of the Congo Crisis leave open the possibility that the CIA did kill Lumumba. Michael Schatzberg nicely summarizes the consensus of most specialists: 'Although it appears that the CIA did not, therefore, directly "pull the trigger," it was, at the very least an encouraging and facilitating behind-the-scenes presence. There was certainly U.S. complicity in Lumumba's death. Madeleine Kalb's detailed study demonstrates, "the evidence

3. U.S. Senate, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1976).

leaves little doubt that U.S. officials encouraged Lumumba's Congolese opponents to eliminate him."⁴ It seems safe to conclude that the *FRUS* editors substantially understated the US role in bringing about Lumumba's assassination.

Another important misrepresentation concerns the selection of Cyrille Adoula during the summer of 1961, as the new prime minister of the Congo. This event is sufficiently important to merit some discussion. In July 1961 the Congolese parliament was recalled for the first time in ten months to select a premier. The parliamentary meeting, which lasted some two weeks, took place in the university town of Lovanium, outside the capital city of Léopoldville, and its proceedings were supervised by United Nations' troops. After extended deliberation, the Congolese parliamentarians selected Adoula, a former labour organizer, as prime minister. Adoula served as premier during the next three years and held the position during crucial periods of the Congo Crisis.

It is now known from various accounts that covert operations played a major role in Adoula's rise to power. Several years after the events, *The New York Times* provided an intriguing description of the Lovanium conference and its aftermath:

Money and shiny American automobiles furnished through the logistical wizardry of Langley [CIA headquarters, in suburban Washington] are said to have been the deciding factors in the vote that brought Mr. Adoula to power . . . In one test after Mr. Adoula had been elected, rival agents from East and West almost stumbled over each other rushing in and out of parliamentary delegates' homes. On the day of the rollcall, American and Czech representatives sat one seat apart in the gallery with lists of members, winking at each other whenever a man pledged to the one turned out to have been picked off the other. Ultimately, Mr. Adoula won by four votes.⁵

A more recent account by Richard Mahoney generally corroborates the above and provides additional details about the CIA role at Lovanium, including Agency collaboration with UN personnel: CIA officers had 'located an underground sewage tunnel leading into the sequestered conclave [at Lovanium] and began passing money destined for key legislators. On the inside, [UN official Mahmoud] Khiary and his Swiss

4. Michael G. Schatzberg, *Mobutu or Chaos?* (University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 1991), pp. 24–25. The Senate report repeatedly acknowledges that CIA officers plotted to assassinate Lumumba, but it also argues that U.S. officials played no role in the actual assassination. Many scholars remain skeptical.

5. *The New York Times*, 26 April 1966, 'How CIA Put "Instant Air Force" into Congo', p. 30. Though the information that this article presents on the CIA has held up well against more recent information, this account may overstate the role of the communist countries. According to a declassified CIA document: '[Since the fall of Lumumba in 1960] the USSR has been extremely cautious in committing its prestige or resources in the Congo' (Central Intelligence Agency, SC no. 10626/64, August 27, 1964; this document was obtained under the Freedom of Information Act).

homme de main used the money to bribe parliamentarians'. Finally, others note that Adoula had longstanding ties to the United States, through CIA-connected labour organizations.⁶

The *Foreign Relations* history does provide extended documentation on the Lovanium conference and the selection of Adoula, but it makes no mention at all of the CIA role. The *FRUS* discussion of these issues is anodyne and consists of analyses of the internal Congolese dynamics—as if US officials were doing nothing but observing events, without trying to manipulate the outcome. Indeed, one document implies that American officials were so removed from the proceedings at Lovanium that they had to rely on indirect sources of information: A US diplomat commented, at one point, that 'Parliament has been cloistered in Lovanium for last week and U.N. has been most effective in prohibiting any contact with [the Congolese parliamentarians]' (p. 174).

The source materials mislead the reader and give the inaccurate impression that the United States did not intervene in the process that led to Adoula's ascendancy. The *Foreign Relations* volume contains additional distortions. Several other prominent Congolese political figures from this period, including security chief Victor Nendeka and national bank president Albert Ndele, worked closely with the local CIA station.⁷ These two individuals are mentioned in the *Foreign Relations* history—but their Agency connections are omitted. The most important omission of all concerns the role of General Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, who was a young army officer at the time of the Congo Crisis. It is very well established that Mobutu had extensive connections to the Central Intelligence Agency, and that he received substantial support, 'advice', and money from the CIA station. Mobutu's ties to the Central Intelligence Agency were originally documented at length in the ground-breaking work of Stephen Weissman. Recent studies have continually added new details about this connection.⁸ CIA support for Mobutu also has been acknowledged by former Director of Central Intelligence William Colby, who stated in 1984:

The question we faced in the Congo was whether that country . . . would be run by some toadies of the old Belgian mining companies [presumably Katanga leader Moïse Tshombe and his supporters] or by men aided by Che Guevara and supported by the Soviet Union [a reference to Antoine Gizenga's regime in Stanleyville]. The CIA found a midpoint between these two extremes—it helped

6. Richard Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1983), pp. 86–87. Regarding Adoula's US connections, see Sean Kelly, *America's Tyrant: The CIA and Mobutu of Zaïre* (American University Press, Washington, DC, 1993); p. 80.

7. *The New York Times*, 26 April 1966, p. 30; Stephen R. Weissman, *American Foreign Policy in the Congo, 1960–1964* (Cornell, University Press, Ithaca, NY), p. 109.

8. Kelly, *America's Tyrant*, chaps. 1–6; Madeleine G. Kalb, *The Congo Cables* (MacMillan, New York: 1982), p. 96–97; René Lemarchand, 'The CIA in Africa: How Central? How Intelligent?' *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 14, no. 3 (1976), pp. 413, 418–19.

Joseph Mobutu, then a nationalist member of the Congolese forces, become the third alternative.⁹

Regarding covert operations more generally, a 1966 investigative story in the *New York Times*, noted that ‘a modest little CIA office in Léopoldville mushroomed overnight into a miniature embassy and a virtual war department . . . the CIA dispersed its agents to learn Congolese politics from the bush on up, to recruit likely leaders, and to finance their bids for power’.¹⁰

How does the *FRUS* volume present these matters? By and large it fails to mention them at all. There are only a few scattered references to General Mobutu’s role in the Crisis, but no mention is made of his involvement in US covert operations. Also, the chief CIA officer in the Congo during this period, Lawrence Devlin, who directed much of Mobutu’s activities—and who played a key role in implementing and to some extent formulating US policy in the Congo—is absent from the *FRUS* volume; Devlin is not mentioned in the volume’s List of Persons, nor is he in the index.¹¹

With regard to the general role of the Central Intelligence Agency, only two verbatim documents are presented, and these do little to illuminate the nature of US policy. One of the documents consists of a CIA evaluation of the *internal* politics of the Congo and provides no information on the Agency’s efforts to influence the events described (pp. 93–94). The second document is curious indeed. After the title, it contains this statement, ‘10 pages of source text not declassified’ (p. 885). The entire contents of this particular document were withheld. To be sure, the preface to the *Foreign Relations* volume (p. v) boasts of the volume’s completeness and, in particular, its inclusion of CIA documents; a careful reading of the text, however, reveals no historically significant CIA documentation.

Readers may suspect that I am overstating my criticisms. It may be objected that I accept at face value previous accounts suggesting that the USA intervened heavily in the crisis, while dismissing the *Foreign Relations* account suggesting the contrary. Perhaps these previous analyses were mistaken, and the *FRUS* history omitted evidence of US intervention for the simple reason that such intervention never occurred. I will note two points here. Firstly it seems highly implausible that the accounts of US

9. William Colby, comments in ‘Should the U.S. Fight Secret Wars?’ *Harper’s*, September (1984), p. 36. Emphasis added.

10. *The New York Times*, 26 April 1966, pp. 1, 30.

11. There is a single reference to ‘Embassy Officer Devlin’ in connection with American military support for the UN force in the Congo; it is not clear whether this person is Lawrence Devlin of the CIA or someone else and, in any case, no mention is made of covert action in this passage. *FRUS, Congo Crisis, Vol. XX*, p. 291. For Devlin’s role, see John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies* (New York, Norton, 1978), pp. 71, 136–37, 169.

intervention gathered by the US Senate investigation, by *The New York Times*, and by numerous scholarly sources were altogether incorrect. It seems equally implausible that recent statements by William Colby and by other ex-CIA officers, which generally corroborate these accounts of covert action, were merely fictional. Secondly, if read very carefully, one finds that the *Foreign Relations* volume concedes that covert operations occurred in the Congo, and that these operations were large in scope. But, this concession is confined to a mere half-page, and the volume omits entirely any mention of US involvement in the assassination of Lumumba, manipulation of the proceedings of the Congolese parliament, or support for General Mobutu's forces.

Conclusion

Throughout the Congo Crisis and for a long period afterward, the US government consistently denied that it engaged in intervention, whether covertly or in any other way. In 1964, for example, US Ambassador Adlai Stevenson stated before the UN General Assembly: 'From the beginning, we have been opposed—and remain opposed—to foreign intervention in the internal affairs of the sovereign and independent State of the Congo'.¹² With the publication of Volume XX of the *FRUS* series, it is clear that the U.S. government persists, some three decades later, in maintaining these denials. Despite the denials, there can no longer by any question that the US intervention played a major and decisive role in the events of the Congo Crisis; equally there can be little doubt that the subsequent history of the Congo/Zaire has been significantly affected by their early intervention.

Part of the problem with the *FRUS* study is that the State Department historians simply could not obtain access to certain intelligence documents. Yet, even documents that the editors did have in their possession—CIA materials pertaining to Lumumba's assassination, for example—receive only the most cursory mention.¹³ In a recent review of a previous *FRUS* history of the Congo Crisis, which covered the year 1960; I concluded that the volume 'seems to erase some very unpleasant memories about American involvement in the Congo', and is 'unreliable about the substance of U.S. policy'.¹⁴ Regrettably, the same conclusion must be drawn of Volume XX of the *FRUS* series. Like previous releases

12. Quoted in Jonathan Kwitny, *Endless Enemies* (Congdon and Weed, New York, 1984), p. 82.

13. Regarding the lack of access to certain intelligence materials, *FRUS, Congo Crisis, Vol. XX*, p. vii. However, the editors readily acknowledge that they did have access to 'A collection of documents prepared in 1975 for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (the Church Committee) and maintained by the CIA Office of Congressional Affairs'. *FRUS, Congo Crisis, Vol. XX*, p. viii.

14. David N. Gibbs, 'Let Us Forget Unpleasant Memories: The U.S. State Department's Analysis of the Congo Crisis', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 33, no. 1 (1995), p. 180.

in the series, this volume is far more interesting for the information it omits than for what it includes, and it poses all the problems inherent in the 'official' history genre. Social scientists may still find some useful material in the State Department's analysis, but they must evaluate this source *very* carefully.