

REVIEW ESSAYS

INSIDE THE CIA: CONGO IN THE 1980s

Larry Devlin. *Chief of Station, Congo: A Memoir of 1960–67*. New York: Public Affairs, 2007. xi + 288 pp. Photographs. Map. Index. \$26.95. Cloth.

Congo watchers have been distressed at the little mention that the Congo receives in U.S. news media. After all, the lethal crisis there has cost the lives of over five million people—often described as the greatest humanitarian catastrophe since World War II. So when a book is published about the Congo's history and the *New York Times* covers it—in its news section, no less—that speaks to its importance. That is what happened in February 2008 to Larry Devlin's *Chief of Station, Congo*. This book makes a major contribution to the history of the Congo just after it gained its independence and especially regarding the role of the U.S. in creating the Mobutu dictatorship.

Devlin was the CIA station chief in Kinshasa in the 1960s. His book reads like a detective novel and tells the story, with impressive frankness, of how he and the U.S. ambassador, Claire Timberlake, quickly came to the conclusion that the newly elected Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba was either Communist controlled or completely duped by Communists, and therefore had to be gotten rid of. It was he who was given the order, apparently originating with President Eisenhower, to arrange for the assassination of Lumumba. But he felt this to be both immoral and unnecessary and he states that he basically sabotaged the order. As we now know, the actual assassination was a Belgo-Congolese affair that occurred five months after the U.S. plan or attempt.

With much skill and courage, and with what appears to have been lightning speed, Devlin managed to recruit Congolese agents and make alliances and friendships with key politicians, all with the goal of removing Lumumba and his allies from power. Devlin tells us in great detail how he supported the first Mobutu coup in September 1960; indeed, without U.S. support that history-changing event almost certainly would not have taken place. For Devlin, it was a major triumph.

One of the most interesting sections of the book deals with the change in U.S. administrations in January 1961 and how aghast Devlin and Timberlake were at what they perceived as the naive perceptions of some of the Kennedy appointees. The Kennedy people were thinking of finding a compromise between Lumumba and his opponents, and that appears to

have been what U.N. Secretary General Hammarskjöld also wanted. But Devlin and Timberlake came to Washington to lobby the new administration against any such notion, and they mobilized CIA Director Allan Dulles in that quest. This too proved to be a triumph.

Devlin has not changed his mind about what had to be done in those early days of the Congo's independence and he almost completely ignores all that has been written and said by scholars and journalists. That is both a weakness and a strength. The weakness is self-evident; the strength lies in the fact that we get a raw, undiluted, and therefore highly credible account of Devlin's perceptions and actions at the time.

But why was he so sure that Lumumba was going to end up as another Castro? Practically the first foreign policy decision Lumumba made, a few days after achieving independence and after the Force Publique mutinied, was to request that the U.S. send three thousand troops to restore order. How many Communist dupes or agents do that? Shortly thereafter he gave a U.S. investor a multi-million-dollar contract to mine the Congo's rich mineral reserves—not the actions of a Communist agent either. After the U.S. rejected Lumumba's request for U.S. troops he appealed to the U.N., which created a peacekeeping force—ONUC—to help restore order and maintain the Congo's sovereignty. But when the West—specifically Belgium, Britain, France, Portugal, and South Africa—gave support to the secession of Katanga, he also appealed for and received military and diplomatic help from the U.S.S.R. That was sufficient fuel for Devlin's suspicions.

In my view, Lumumba was simply applying a strategy to the international arena that had worked well for him in his relations with the Belgians—play opponents against each other. He did not appreciate that in 1960 the Eisenhower Administration and much of the West had viewed Africa as its sphere of influence and not an arena of competition. That was his tragic miscalculation. And yet as Richard D. Mahoney points out in *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* (Oxford, 1983), on February 1, 1961, Kennedy's Congo Task Force recommended working toward an accommodation “on the basis of neither the East nor the West filling the vacuum in the Congo” (65). Is it possible to speculate that if the Kennedy inauguration had occurred in November instead of January, the CIA-backed coup would have been reversed and a compromise government would have received international backing?

The counter to Devlin's account can be found in Mahoney's excellent scholarly analysis. First, he argues that the Eisenhower Administration suffered from a “phobia” about Lumumba despite repeated attempts by the Congolese Prime Minister to obtain U.S. support and sympathy. Second, Mahoney describes in great detail how firmly Hammarskjöld supported reconciliation between Lumumbists and Mobutists—and here I simplify the factions involved—but was opposed and undermined by the Eisenhower Administration and especially by Devlin and Timberlake. This continued to be true even after the Soviet diplomats and military had been expelled from Kinshasa subsequent to Mobutu's September 1960 coup. Third, Ma-

honey carefully describes—indeed, it is the main focus of his book—how President-elect Kennedy was intent on changing U.S. policy in the Congo in a direction that distinguished nationalists from Communist supporters. In fact, members of Lumumba's alliance hoped and expected that Kennedy, once inaugurated, would encourage a return to parliamentary legitimacy—which most likely would have returned Lumumba to the premiership. Since Mobutu and his allies were almost certainly worried that this might occur, it is not far-fetched to speculate that Lumumba's murder two days before the inauguration was timed to avoid this "danger." Finally, and contrary to Devlin, Mahoney sees the U.S. policy at the time as a great failure. With the Lumumbists launching the Congo Rebellions, stability had not been won, but instead the country was plunged into the largest postindependence revolutionary uprising anywhere in Africa up to that point. As Devlin recounts, he and the CIA were once again at the forefront of U.S. policy. Anti-Castro Cuban pilots were recruited (to fly missions against the rebels), as were South African mercenaries (as ground forces). The coup de grace for the rebellions occurred with the insertion of a Belgo-American airborne force and the capture of Stanleyville (Kisangani). Some estimates suggest that a million Congolese lost their lives as a result of this uprising.

Devlin's Cold War tunnel vision about Communist influence turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophesy because the rebellions *did* have real links to, and received support from, the Communist world. But had Lumumba and his allies remained in a government of national union, would the rebellions have occurred? That is a question Devlin does not consider or answer. The defeat of the rebellions was once again a CIA triumph and also a victory for Devlin over the early predilections of the Kennedy Administration. So, from a narrow perspective, U.S. aims were achieved and a proud Devlin was given honorable recognition by the U.S. government. For the Congolese these developments and achievements had a different meaning. They were followed by thirty-two years of Mobutu dictatorship which, simply put, ruined the country.

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