In 1961, John F. Kennedy confronted a seemingly peripheral but highly symbolic foreign policy dilemma: whether to finance Ghana’s Volta River Project (VRP), a massive dam construction designed to generate electricity, promote modernization, and diversify Ghana’s economy – a project similar in scope to the 1933 Tennessee Valley Authority, which proponents lauded as a success story that could be replicated in the non-Western world.

In 1960, Eisenhower had pledged $30 million toward construction of the VRP but soon reneged on the offer when the assassination of Kwame Nkrumah’s Congolese protégé Patrice Lumumba – whose elimination the CIA plotted if not executed – soured relations between Washington and Accra. Recent history indicated what consequences might ensue from this decision. A few years prior, on July 19, 1956, the Eisenhower administration withdrew funding for Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Aswan Dam project, which the Egyptian leader likewise envisioned as a massive modernizing project necessary for his country’s future. Many observers viewed the withdrawal of financing as a provocation against Nasser and a catalyst for the Suez Crisis, inaugurated when Nasser – in an act of defiance celebrated across the Third World – nationalized the British- and French-controlled Suez Canal Company on July 26, 1956. Swiftly, Britain, France, and Israel collaborated in an ill-fated invasion of Egypt that summoned superpower involvement and nearly precipitated world war.

As a Massachusetts senator in the late 1950s, JFK distinguished himself as a critic of European colonialism and Eisenhower’s foreign policy in the Third World. Whereas Eisenhower reneged on a critical foreign aid project in Africa, supposedly to disastrous effect, Kennedy expanded development projects in Africa while cultivating relationships with the continent’s leadership. Exemplary of the confluence of diplomacy and development, projects like the VRP tested Kennedy’s anticolonial mettle as much as they frustrated leaders like Nkrumah. Consider, for example, Richard Wright’s admonition to Nkrumah in his conclusion to *Black Power* (1954): “Beware of a Volta
project built by foreign money. Build your own Volta, and build it out of the sheer lives and bodies of your people!" Yet many African leaders, including Nkrumah, found such counsel difficult to put into practice.

While fielding divergent views from his cabinet, public opinion, and other politicians, Kennedy also – idiosyncratically – sought the counsel of numerous African heads of state on the VRP. Why, historian Philip E. Muehlenbeck asks, did Kennedy ultimately decide to finance the VRP? Few inside or outside of Kennedy’s cabinet supported aid for a project initiated by Nkrumah, whom officials perceived, at best, as a mercurial practitioner of nonalignment and, at worst, as an anti-Western radical with Soviet inclinations. At the same time, Kennedy was aware that Nkrumah represented one of the most prominent voices on the continent. In private conversations with JFK, pro-Western African leaders were critical of Ghana’s prime minister, whom they saw as a megalomaniacal aspirant to pan-African leadership. Nonetheless, most Africans advised the president to support the VRP. If he did not, their argument went, the continent would lose faith in Kennedy’s commitment to African development and Nkrumah would be forced to seek out Soviet assistance. Kennedy’s deliberations on the VRP, emblematic of his approach to foreign policy in the Third World and the global anticolonial movement, illuminates the ways in which his strategy intersected, and conflicted, with other domestic and foreign policy priorities: anticommunism, desegregation, and modernization.

Scholars of Kennedy’s stance on decolonization and foreign policy in the Third World differ markedly on the substance and novelty of his approach. Whether negative or positive, however, assessments of Kennedy’s relation to decolonization usually proceed with scant reference to the intellectual history of the global anticolonial movement itself. Yet since this debate hinges in large measure on the complex meanings of decolonization, this intellectual history is crucial to gauging Kennedy’s postcolonial legacy. Toward this end, this chapter aims to construct a dialogue between JFK’s intellectuals and anticolonial thought: one constellated around dilemmas flowing from the rise of decolonization, on the one hand, and the apex of Cold War tensions, on the other.

Critics of JFK’s record on decolonization contend that his commitments were largely rhetorical and continuous with Eisenhower’s policies; these critics rightly cite his dedication to anticommunism and covert adventures like the Bay of Pigs debacle, proxy wars in Vietnam and Laos, and the CIA’s involvement in the assassination of Lumumba and attempts on the life of Fidel Castro. Some highlight JFK’s inaction on apartheid South Africa. Still other critics suggest that his endorsement of African independence was calculated to secure African American voter support without actually
undertaking civil rights reform, which would have alienated an indispensible southern Democratic constituency. For some commentators, modernization theory represents a serious effort, in the volatile context of decolonization, to promote change that would make the Third World look like “us” – a synecdoche for postwar liberalism – and not like “them,” the Soviets or Chinese. For others, modernization theory rebranded Manifest Destiny and imperialism while disavowing its intellectual heritage in Enlightenment philosophies of history that subordinated non-Western peoples to advanced Western societies.4

Scholars like Muehlenbeck have defended Kennedy’s African policies, arguing that the president – at considerable political risk – combined powerful rhetoric and diplomacy with substantive development measures in an unmatched attempt to court African leaders, constrain colonial aggression by European allies like France and Portugal, and advance economic and nation building projects in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. For example, Kennedy pressured Portugal to relinquish its colonial occupation of Mozambique and Angola, despite counsel from military officials and other cabinet members who worried that antagonizing Lisbon would result in the United States losing its strategic military base in the Azores, a cluster of islands controlled by Portugal. When newspapers quoted (or misquoted) G. Mennen Williams, assistant secretary of state for African affairs, as proclaiming, “Africa is for the Africans,” Kennedy qualified but did not retreat from Williams’ controversial remark. When queried at a press conference, Kennedy gamely replied: “The statement ‘Africa is for the Africans’ does not seem to me to be a very unreasonable statement. He made it clear that he was talking about all those who felt that they were Africans, whatever their color might be, whatever their race might be. I do not know who else Africa should be for.”5 No doubt Kennedy expanded his conception of African identity (to include European settler communities in Africa) after facing a backlash from Portuguese, South African, and French colonialists, but he also envisioned indigenous Africans – at least those who seemed winnable to the liberal Democratic sphere – as the agents of the continent’s future.

Though JFK’s rhetorical support for decolonization did not always translate into equally robust policy, perhaps his forceful language constitutes his most enduring legacy in the postcolonial arena. What one scholar wrote in regard to Eisenhower’s foreign policy in Africa also applies to Kennedy’s: “While scholars may bemoan the confusion of style and substance, oratory and action, it is often difficult to distinguish between them.”6 Indeed, that difficulty is amplified in the case of JFK, the nation’s most literary president. But it is inaccurate to suggest that Kennedy differed little – either in style or substance – from his predecessors.
On first glance, previous presidents established precedents for Kennedy’s own anticolonial posture. In the 1920s, Woodrow Wilson electrified anticolonial nationalists in Egypt, Vietnam, and India with his pronouncements of national self-determination as a universal principle supported by the U.S. government.7 In 1941, Churchill and Roosevelt advanced the Atlantic Charter, which proclaims: “They respect the rights of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.”8 But in the same way that Wilson’s Fourteen Points applied to European nations reeling from the belligerence and destruction of the First World War, the Atlantic Charter addressed primarily European nations threatened by Nazism and Fascist aggression – not non-Western nations under the yoke of colonialism. Subsequent statements by Truman and Eisenhower betrayed a similar tendency. In the decade after World War II, these presidents struggled to reconcile competing demands that would later vex Kennedy: Western, anti-Soviet unity and postwar reconstruction in Europe, on the one hand, and the increasingly untenable colonial status quo, on the other. Under these constraints, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations muted their opposition to colonialism in order to preserve Cold War and NATO solidarity.9

Kennedy’s rhetoric far exceeded the equivocal language of his predecessors. As a young senator in July of 1957, Kennedy delivered a speech to the Senate, “The Challenge of Imperialism: Algeria,” that repudiated the French colonial war in Algeria and electrified the Afro-Arab world. “The most powerful single force in the world today,” the speech begins, “is neither communism nor capitalism, neither the H-bomb nor the guided missile – it is man’s eternal desire to be free and independent.” Freedom is under threat by both Soviet and Western imperialism, and among global infringements on national freedom, Algeria stands out “above all the rest.” Consequently Algeria has become a matter for U.S., not only French, foreign policy. Kennedy ridiculed the notion that the Eisenhower administration offended neither side in the conflict with its “head-in-the-sands policy – when, in truth, we have earned the suspicion of all.”10 Given the Eisenhower administration’s provision of weapons to France through NATO, its tacit acceptance of colonial rule (despite vague and occasional references to national independence for all nations), and its unwillingness to promote French-Algerian mediation via the UN or other diplomatic channels, the United States, as Kennedy understood, was hardly agnostic in the conflict – especially from the Third World vantage point. Failure to shift this policy portended ill for the Cold War, as communists wasted no opportunity to capitalize on Western depredations in Asia, Africa, and
Latin America. Kennedy’s speech frames the conflict as a hindrance to the successful operation of NATO, and for this reason a properly global concern. Yet Kennedy also draws deftly on the revolutionary histories of France and America to legitimate Algerian struggles for liberation, imbuing the conflict with what his Western audience would recognize as a “universal” dimension.

Domestically, Republicans censured Kennedy’s speech and reaffirmed their support for France, America’s oldest ally. Secretary of State Dulles replied that if Senator Kennedy wanted to arraign colonialism, “he ought to concentrate on the Communist variety rather than the French.” 11 Even Adlai Stevenson, the racial liberal, denounced the senator’s speech on Algeria. In France, the speech elicited sharp criticism, and in Algeria a bomb detonated outside the American consulate.

In France, the Algerian War was a crucible for intellectuals, shaping the postwar discourse on the interwoven themes of revolutionary violence, decolonization, and identity politics. According to James Le Sueur, as intellectuals on the left and right “intervened in the public debate over decolonization . . . they were frequently targeted by the state, military, police, other intellectuals, vigilante groups, and even the fascistic terrorism of the OAS (Organisation de l’Armée Secrète) for their real or perceived roles as intellectuals.” 12 Famously, Frantz Fanon resigned from his post as a psychiatrist in Algeria’s Blida-Joinville hospital, where he had analyzed the effects of Algerian mental disorders in the context of French colonial war. Renouncing his French identity, Fanon adopted the Algerian struggle as his own, joining the resistance as a military theorist – and employing, as Tunisian intellectual Albert Memmi noted, the first-person plural pronoun we (as in We Algerians) to signify his identification with the resistance. JFK’s celebrated emphasis on courage (defined as “grace under pressure,” which he is said to have adapted from Hemingway) stands in recto verso relation to the heroic subjectivities of figures such as Fanon. Outside the precincts of power but far from powerless, many anticolonial intellectuals were free to experiment with various forms of solidarity politics, often beyond the boundaries of the nation-state or liberal democratic norms. If the constraints of elected office required distance between official support for Third World independence and actual liberation movements, Kennedy relied on diplomacy, powerful rhetorical pronouncements, pressure on European colonial allies, and foreign aid and modernization schemes as means to circumvent the war and violence that Fanon (and communism) imagined as intrinsic to decolonization.

But when conciliatory methods failed, Kennedy’s administration advocated covert military operations in geographies deemed irreversibly
interwoven with communism. Kennedy proved as ardent an anticommunist as his predecessors, but unlike Truman and Eisenhower he was better able to distinguish between communist radicalism and Third World – especially African – nationalism, and to recognize the latter movements’ legitimate aspirations. He grasped that leaders like Nkrumah, Nasser, Ben Bella, Sekou Toure, and Julius Nyerere were suspicious of communism but keen to manipulate the Soviet Union and the United States to their advantage: one of the geopolitical innovations of nonalignment. But there were limits, of course, to Kennedy’s indulgence of anticolonial leaders who veered too closely to the Soviet sphere or otherwise disrupted the calibrations of U.S. foreign policy. Vietnam, Laos, and Cuba stand out as the exemplary cases of this clash between anticolonial agency and anticommunist imperatives.

In Latin America, a region where the administration suspected the Cold War would not be won but could well be lost, Cuba “was an immediate priority for John Kennedy.” At a press conference on April 12, 1961, amid suspicions of U.S. hostility to the Cuban Revolution, Kennedy announced to the world that the United States did not intend to invade Cuba: “there will not be, under any conditions, any intervention in Cuba by United States armed forces, and this government will do everything it possibly can . . . to make sure that there are no Americans involved in any actions inside.” But days after this announcement, the Bay of Pigs invasion not only embarrassed Kennedy and vitiated his anticolonial clout but also redounded to Soviet power in the region.

Contrast Kennedy’s public image after this debacle with Khrushchev’s speech on January 6, 1961, when he outlined an ambitious new foreign policy, welcoming “Fidel Castro as a legitimate member of the Soviet bloc. And in deference to both Castro and Mao Zedong,” Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali write, “who considered themselves more revolutionary than the peasant bureaucrat in the Kremlin, Khrushchev added that for the first time the Kremlin viewed national liberation struggles as ‘sacred wars’ that merited assistance and would probably require violence to succeed. As examples of this kind of war, he offered the struggles in Algeria and Vietnam.” No doubt the Soviet language of sacred war resonated with Fanonism and its various progeny, such as the Black Panther movement. Yet for many liberal African American activists working within democratic institutional processes, anticolonial struggle involved not a turn to violence or to transnational militancy but rather patient, methodical, and relentless mastery of the institutions that maintained power.

As Carol Anderson argues, in many instances “black liberals were like stealth fighters who imbibed the strategy pronounced by the first
African-American leader of the NAACP, James Weldon Johnson. Johnson noted that ‘the black man fights passively . . . He bears the fury of the storm as does the willow tree.’ That stealth resistance, to bend like the willow instead of taking the blows and snapping like an oak, has made it difficult to discern what role black liberals played at all in decolonization.” These African American liberals were the older urbane intellectuals with whom the Kennedy administration felt it could communicate – not the younger generation of writers like James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry, who in May of 1963 met in Robert Kennedy’s Manhattan apartment, warning him of the “explosive situation” of racial discrimination in the northern cities.  

This older generation included figures like Ralph Bunche, the diplomat and secretary of the United Nations who at that time was embroiled in the Congo conflict. In early June of 1960, in the midst of the presidential campaign, JFK sent Robert Kennedy to proposition Bunche about the prospect of assisting his campaign as an adviser on international affairs. Robert Kennedy, according to Bunche’s UN colleague and biographer, Brian Urquhart, “said that his brother recognized that foreign affairs would be the most important challenge facing the new president and needed sound advice by someone who was ‘practicing’ rather than theorizing in the field.” Devoted to the United Nations, an institution he helped to build, Bunche declined this request.

But Kennedy’s intuition about Bunche – who was nothing if not a “practicing” diplomat – was astute, and it provides some terms with which to gauge the future president’s own relation to decolonization. In 1936, Bunche published his searing Marxist-inflected treatise, *A World View of Race*, about which he later wrote that it was earning him the label “Red.” But over time he toned down his radical proclivities, if not his dedication to African independence, and labored for decades within the U.S. foreign policy establishment in some of the world’s most volatile conflicts. Like Kennedy, Bunche advocated Third World independence but was also an anticommunist who sought to mediate decolonization through international institutions like the UN. During the 1940s, Bunche developed the system of “trusteeship,” which facilitated a gradualist approach to independence.

Kennedy understood that the gradualist approach had, in the early 1960s, become untenable, and like Bunche he too increasingly found his ideals diluted by practical considerations. As one commentator notes, three and a half years after his controversial speech on the French war in Algeria, Kennedy “viewed the Algerian situation through a presidential political lens. He now confronted the same dilemma that had plagued his predecessor: How to advance the principle of anti-colonialism without jeopardizing U.S. security interests? . . . Would the cause of containment
best be served by aligning with the political ‘wave of the future’ in the Third World, or by backing the colonial policies of important NATO allies?’ Vis-à-vis anticolonialism, Kennedy’s own premium on courage could not withstand the pressure of presidential realpolitik. As Miloud Barkaoui notes, JFK had repeatedly urged the Eisenhower administration to intervene in the conflict via NATO or UN negotiations. “As president, however, he became much more concerned about the threat which international communism was believed to be posing not only to Algeria but also to the entire region, at a time when the Cold War rivalry was becoming more endemic.” Amid these pressures, Kennedy reverted to the Eisenhower approach to Algeria – containment, anticommunism, accommodation to France and American Europeanists – during his tenure in office.

Aware that the NATO and Soviet spheres were competing for their allegiance, Africans questioned the sincerity of Kennedy’s commitment to African independence. If the nation subjugated its own black population, what did JFK’s outreach to Africa mean? Was it merely a Cold War ploy? As commentators have claimed, much of Kennedy’s outreach to the Third World functioned as a proxy for addressing domestic civil rights concerns. “The global decolonization movement,” Renee Romano writes, “contributed to a growing concern about the problem of domestic discrimination, particularly in an administration that was more interested in foreign than domestic policy.” The domestic situation enabled anticolonial leaders like Mao, in 1963, to articulate his support of the Afro-American struggle in the following terms: “The Kennedy administration is insidiously using dual tactics,” Mao asserted. “On the one hand, it continues to connive and take part in discrimination against Negroes and their persecution, and it even sends troops to suppress them. On the other hand; in the attempt to numb the fighting will of the black people and deceive the masses of the country the Kennedy administration is parading as an advocate of ‘the defense of human rights’ and ‘the protection of the civil rights of Negroes,’ calling upon the black people to exercise ‘restraint’ and proposing the ‘civil rights legislation’ to Congress. But more and more Afro-Americans are seeing through the tactics of the Kennedy administration.”

Like his anticolonial support for Algeria and Angola, JFK’s courtship of African and other Third World leaders was meant to appeal to African Americans – but Kennedy, aware of the need to placate southern segregationists, could characterize anticolonialism as a Cold War imperative rather than an explicitly racial issue.

This strategy conscripted the Kennedy administration into the civil rights maelstrom in a manner it might have preferred to avoid, or at least postpone.
Though Kennedy prioritized foreign policy over desegregation, intensifying racial conflict and militancy among black Americans forced his administration to confront racial equality domestically. Historians trace the president’s increased attention to civil rights to the spring of 1963, when Kennedy began to deliver speeches couching racial equality as a “moral issue” and the State Department’s Dean Rusk appeared before the Senate Commerce Committee in July to promote civil rights legislation. The early years of the Cold War compelled every U.S. presidential administration to undertake some measure of global public diplomacy that projected racial progress and countered Communist propaganda. But Rusk, unexpectedly, asserted that the imperative of civil rights reform transcended Cold War public relations. “We must try to eliminate discrimination due to race, color, religion, not to make others think better of us but because it is incompatible with the great ideals to which our democratic society is dedicated.”

Under the sway of Robert Kennedy, who was influenced by Pedro Sanjuan, a member of the subcabinet committee on civil rights also charged with rectifying discrimination against visiting African diplomats, John Kennedy began to focus on legislation that would form the basis of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

But Kennedy’s energetic commitment to foreign policy and decolonization superseded his investment in desegregation. In a 1960 address to the National Council of Women, Kennedy spoke on the topic “The New Nations of Africa.” He begins with the observation that “the course of European empire had moved southward – along the coast of Africa, and around the Cape of Good Hope to the east. With the discovery of America, the kings, the generals, and the traders turned westward, leaving Africa to become the neglected and undeveloped province of a few European nations.” But today, “more than four centuries later, the work of Columbus is being reversed,” and the “nations of the West once more look toward Africa.” Paternalistic in tone (“we have done almost nothing to educate the African people”), his language reveals a recurrent ambiguity: the image of the West looking toward Africa suggests, on the one hand, that the continent now represents an agential, perhaps avant-garde force in history; on the other hand, the language of “neglect” implies that the continent remains in a client or tutelary relation to America and the West.

Where the United States was concerned, Kennedy’s rhetorical aim was to naturalize this relation, with respect to the demands of noblesse oblige among rich countries and to America’s self-image as the “first” anticolonial nation. What better qualified nation than the United States, so the argument went, to guide the aspirations of newly independent African and Asian nations – to fan, in Harold Macmillan’s phrase of 1960, the “wind of change” sweeping throughout Africa?
“We want an Africa,” Kennedy insisted, “which is not a pawn in the Cold War – or a battleground between East and West.” Then he added: “And this, too, is what the African people want.” And yet it is difficult to deny that Kennedy viewed Africa and Asia precisely as Cold War battlegrounds. In a 1958 speech to the Senate on Indian nationalism, Kennedy argued: “India stands as the only effective competitor to China for the faith and following of the millions of uncommitted and restless peoples. Should India fall prey to internal disorder or disillusionment among either its masses or [its] leaders and become absorbed in the Communist system, the free world would suffer an incalculable blow.” The key phrase in this and other speeches on the nonaligned world is “uncommitted nations”: he saw nonaligned or “uncommitted” nations not as a threat but as an opportunity for Western recruitment; and he invoked America’s own history of “noninvolvement in the great international controversies of the nineteenth century” as a way to appeal to both Cold War opponents of nonalignment and Third World nationalists.

In Kennedy’s helicopter ride around Washington, DC, with Leopold Senghor – the president of Senegal and poet who held an agrégé degree (the French equivalent of the doctorate), and with whom Kennedy shared an intellectual sympathy – the U.S. president elicited the Senegalese leader’s advice on Nkrumah’s VRP. In “spite of this man’s [Nkrumah’s] instability,” Senghor replied, “in spite of his radical politics with most of which I disagree, Mr. President, you have no alternative but to go along with the project, particularly if it’s economically feasible. Otherwise the Africans will accuse you of violating your own policies in regard to neutrality and non-alignment.” Even the conservative, pro-Western Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who believed that Nkrumah possessed a “messianic complex,” expressed a similar view in a conversation with Robert Kennedy. “Despite his feelings about the leader,” writes Muehlenbeck, “Houphouët-Boigny believed that the United States should finance the dam, but only after forcing Nkrumah to make a clear-cut choice about aligning with either the West or the East.”

Doubting that Nkrumah would capitulate to such a condition, Robert Kennedy countenanced a withholding of U.S. aid for the VRP.

For Fanon, this Cold War courtship of continental leaders like Senghor and Houphouët-Boigny was ripe for parody. “These men at the head of empty countries,” Fanon writes, “who talk too loud, are most irritating. You’d like to shut them up. But, on the contrary, they are in great demand. They are given bouquets; they are invited to dinner. In fact, we quarrel over who shall have them . . . African and Asian officials may in the same month follow a course on socialist planning in Moscow and one on the advantages of the liberal economy in London or Columbia.
University.” For Fanon, the truly modern subjects and genuine “political animals” are the “native and underdeveloped men” hunched over their transistor radios, absorbing the geopolitical backdrop to the fates of figures like “Phouma and Phoumi, Lumumba and Tshombe, Ahidjo and Moumie, Kenyatta, and the men who are pushed forward regularly to replace him.” Fanon’s natives “live in the atmosphere of doomsday, and they consider that nothing ought to be let pass unnoticed. That is why they understand these [Third World] figures very well” and “can unmask the forces working behind them.”

One of the central “forces” behind these new North-South relationships involved Kennedy’s commitment to global modernization, a massive undertaking in which “benevolent intentions and self-serving economic interests are hopelessly intertwined.” Through the lens of modernization theory, Kennedy’s administration articulated a version of what commentators now refer to as the “global South.” As Kennedy declared, sounding a note not all that different from the proponents of decolonization themselves, “The great battleground for the defense and expansion of freedom today, is the whole southern half of the globe – Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East – the lands of the rising peoples. Their revolution is the greatest in human history. They seek an end to injustice, tyranny and exploitation. More than an end, they seek a beginning.” Modernization theory sought, we might argue, to incorporate the revolutionary energies of decolonization movements into the United States’ Cold War narrative. Like a deus ex machina, modernization theorists descended on those developing nations, especially in Latin America, that they envisaged as situated in a “transitional” phase between tradition and modernity, with the goal of foreclosing social revolution or communist subversion. Kennedy initiatives like the Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps constituted the means to facilitate this transition to the modern democratic capitalist order.

More than a development initiative, Alianza para el Progreso formed part of an ambitious plan to “complete the revolution of the Americas, to build a hemisphere where all men can hope for a suitable standard of living and all can live out their lives in dignity and freedom,” as Kennedy characterized the Alliance in a commemoration speech. “Like Truman before him,” writes María Saldaña-Portillo, “John F. Kennedy responded to revolutionary movements in the Third World with a dual strategy of military intervention and development aid.” Yet what is surprising, she argues, is how the rhetoric of development imbued, and served mutually to constitute, both the modernization discourses pioneered by the Kennedy administration and revolutionary appeals in the Americas by the Zapatistas in Mexico or figures like Che Guevara and Malcolm X. For Kennedy and Rostow as much as for Guevara
JFK and the Global Anticolonial Movement

and Castro, modernization was revolutionary, but this process required the “peasant” and other classes to undergo regimes of discipline and transformations in consciousness before reaping the benefits of modernity.

Modernization, then, entailed more than large-scale industrialization and development projects. In order for developing nations to become modern, non-Western peoples must replace their “traditional” values with “modern” values. Modernization theorists, according to Michael Latham, associated traditional values with fatalism, superstition, emotionalism, stagnancy, romanticism, inertia, and apathy; they identified modern values as industriousness, rationalism, cleanliness, self-discipline, orderliness, and efficiency. Moreover, modernization theorists hoped that the distinctively “American” traits of empathy, altruism, entrepreneurialism, idealism, and ingenuity would demonstrate the superiority and benevolence of U.S. foreign policy and thus rub off on the developing world.

On this theory, modern infrastructural and industrialization efforts could only succeed if accompanied by the cultivation of modern habits, values, and modes of conduct. In her posthumously produced play written in 1960, *Les Blancs*, Lorraine Hansberry portrays a fictitious African country, Zatembe, in the throes of revolution. A rebuttal to Genet’s *Les Noirs*, the play reverses the ethnographic gaze of colonialism, diagnosing the subjectivity of *les blancs*: the coterie of European doctors, missionaries, and military officials who labor in a ramshackle hospital and, despite intensifying “terrorist” attacks by local insurrectionaries, try to maintain order and security in their colonial outpost. As one character, Dr. Dekoven, explains to Charlie Morris, an American journalist: “Mr. Morris, there is a hospital for Europeans only seventy-five miles from here. Entirely modern. Here things are lashed together with vines from the jungle. Surely you must have wondered why.” Charlie says, “Well, I assumed I knew why – that it was obvious . . .” Dr. Dekoven replies: “Is it? Electric lines between here and Zatembe could be laid within weeks, a road in six months. The money exists. All over the world people donate to Missions like this. It is not obvious, not obvious at all.” After generations of secular and religious missionary work, wonders Dr. Dekoven, why does the starkly unequal distribution of modernity continue to exist in places like Zatembe?

Like the development experts in Kennedy’s cabinet, the white characters in *Les Blancs*, if obviously paternalistic and missionary in their attitudes, are not unsympathetic. The problem is less that modern resources and development aid are channeled only to white colonists at the expense of blacks; the problem, in Hansberry’s estimation, is that both the European civilizing mission as well as the ideology promoted by Kennedy’s “New Frontier” – with its undercurrent of Manifest Destiny and Enlightenment
racialization – disfigures the noble dream of universal modernization itself. In the affectively charged milieu of decolonization, it engenders a violent social fragmentation, irrespective of the intentions of ordinary blacks and whites who have managed to get along in colonial society. “Mr. Morris,” Dr. Dekoven explains, “the struggle here has not been to push the African into the Twentieth Century – but at all costs to keep him away from it! We do not look down on the black because we really think he is lazy, we look down on him because he is wise enough to resent working for us.”

Influenced by Kennedy’s modernization theorist contemporaries as well as their progenitors in the Chicago School of Sociology, the African American writer Richard Wright also adopted the idiom of “traditional” and “modern” societies to describe the gulf between the South and North. However, Wright drew sharply different conclusions about how modernization would unfold in postcolonial nations. In his 1957 lecture “Tradition and Industrialization: The Historic Meaning of the Plight of the Tragic Elite in Asia and Africa,” Wright asserts his qualification to speak on this topic by virtue of his sense that as “a Negro living in a white Western Christian society, I’ve never been allowed to blend, in a natural and healthy manner, with the culture and civilization of the West.” This condition “creates a psychological distance . . . between me and my environment. I’m self-conscious.”

As a roving observer of the global decolonization movement, Wright’s intuition was that this psychological distance, an internalized (dis-)location inside and outside the West, likewise afflicted his Asian and African contemporaries. Wright insisted that the Third World must hasten modernization in order both to defend itself from Western encroachments and to interrupt the master-client relationship of the development paradigm. But he also intuited that this massive social transition to modernity – a process the postcolonial world must accomplish within decades, versus the course of development transpiring over centuries in the West – presaged intense emotional, religious, and psychological fractures in Asia and Africa: what recent commentators have chosen to identify as the cultural source of a current “clash of civilizations.”

“The West must trust that part of itself,” Wright continues, “that it has thrust, however blunderingly, into Asia and Africa. Nkrumah, Nasser, Sukarno, and Nehru, and the Western educated heads of these newly created national states, must be given carte blanche to modernize their lands without overlordship of the West, and we must understand the methods that they will feel compelled to use.” Wright does not elaborate on what methods Third World modernization will entail (and he faced criticism for endorsing militarist measures toward this end), but he was convinced that
postcolonial modernity must proceed along an autonomous path lest it transmogrify into neocolonial farce.

With the advantages of hindsight, a growing body of literature has diagnosed the dilemmas of foreign aid and development – and proposed why such initiatives were likely doomed from the start. Yet if the short tenure of Kennedy’s presidency could not envisage the autonomous path for Third World development that Wright had in mind, it had little inkling of the impending failures of modernization theory or the intractable tensions between anticommunist imperatives and anticolonial support. It is left to the practitioners of counterfactual history to imagine what shape another 1,000 or 3,000 days of JFK’s leadership might have meant for U.S. foreign policy and the postcolonial world.

NOTES

3 See Douglas Field, Andrew Preston, and Amanda Kay McVety’s chapters in this volume.
9 On the precedent set by Wilson for a liberal, international order, the continuation of this program by Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower, and its subsequent interface with modernization theory and decolonization, see Latham, The Right Kind of Revolution, 22–32.


James D. Le Sueur, Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 4–5.


Ibid., 73.


Romano, “No Diplomatic Immunity,” 546.


See Latham, Modernization as Ideology, 64–65.


Muehlenbeck, Betting on the Africans, 146.

Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 81.


34 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 725.