

The Coup against Lumumba:

Connections between decolonization and U.S. civil rights in the African American press

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Both mainstream and African American newspapers intensely covered unrest in the Congo in 1960 and 1961, allowing the United States to watch as Patrice Lumumba, Congo's prime minister, rose to power only to be dismissed and assassinated within months. Lumumba said, "Westerners must understand that no friendship is possible in a relationship of subjection and subordination."¹ African American newspapers such as Baltimore's *Afro American* showed protests and resistance as black people opposed U.S. intervention in Lumumba's death, but mainstream newspapers such as *The New York Times* reported less of Lumumba's death and resistance. Editorials and articles about African American opposition to U.S. intervention showed a country deeply engrained with a fear of communism associated with African anti-imperialism movement, furthering racism in foreign relations and at home.

Long before political changes in the Congo reached their boiling point, African Americans made formal statements of anti-imperialism in Africa. African American Communist leaders advocated in 1928 for a global look at color, rather than just a focus on U.S. domestic policy. Leaders argued that African Americans faced a white imperialism that affected black-skinned people everywhere.² A Pan-African movement led by Marcus Garvey developed from this idea of international racial equality. One of the strong leaders in this movement was W.E.B. DuBois, a Fisk University graduate with a PhD. from Harvard who edited the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's publication, *Crisis*, for two decades. He defined the Pan-African

¹ Samuel Hoskins and Charles P. Howard, Sr., "Belgian Intrigue Backed," *The Afro American*, March 11, 1961, sec. A9.

² Wilson Record, *Race and Radicalism: The NAACP and the Communist Party in Conflict* (Ithaca, New York, 1964):55-56.

movement as “organized protection of the Negro world, led by American Negroes.”³ The NAACP brought together African Americans seeking civil rights and served as a forum for discussion of international matters. But the early connection to the communist party helped create the western association between African Americans, communists and anti-imperialists.

The end of World War II ushered in African American criticism of the Western powers’ stance on colonialism. The five largest African American leadership groups adopted policies against colonialism and unified against the problems of race. The NAACP, the National Urban League, the National Negro Congress, the National Council of Negro Women, and the March on Washington Movement all took stances for African American independence and civil liberties.⁴ The groups continued to advocate for egalitarianism even as McCarthyism and fear of communism ran rampant. Most parties separated from their hard line support of communism, but a thread of socialism still existed within the African American leadership. This association of African Americans and communism affected much of the U.S. policy toward the Congo and its own people.

T.R. Kanza, one of the first Congolese scholars, spoke to a crowd at Oxford University in 1967. He said, “The very name Congo is evocative of instability, war, secession, rebellion, revolution, assassinations, hangings. Indeed the word ‘congolization’ has entered the French language and the press applies to term Congo to any country embroiled in chaos, internal unrest, political, military or whatever.”⁵ The root of unrest in the Congo began with the central African country’s inception in 1885, when

³ W.E.B. DuBois, “My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom,” in *What the Negro Wants*, Rayford W. Logan, ed., (Chapel Hill, North Carolina Press, 1944): 60.

⁴ James L. Roark, “American Black Leaders: The Response to Colonialism and the Cold War, 1943-1953,” *African Historical Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1971): 255.

⁵ T. R. Kanza, *African Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 266 (Jan., 1968), 55.

Belgium's King Leopold II laid personal claim to the territory.⁶ To the detriment of the indigenous population, the Congo was one of the wealthiest regions in the world in terms of natural resources. Leopold referred to his territory as a piece of the African "cake" after visits to the country by Henry Stanley and David Livingstone revealed the Congo's wealth in natural resources. Leopold acquired the territory and began to use Congolese slaves to construct railroads and engage in successive harvests of natural resources such as copper and rubber.

In the late 1800s, Europeans became aware of the brute force that left millions dead or maimed by losses of hands and feet. A bitter outcry against such actions led the Belgian government to take over the king's claim in 1908, when the state began schools to educate students in what Kanza described as the "local vernacular" and not progressive higher education.⁷ He, like many scholars, argued that the deliberate lack of education subjugated Congolese citizens to Belgian authority and crippled potential leadership when the Belgian government abruptly handed over the colony to indigenous government in 1960. At the time of the government change there were fewer than 20 Congolese university graduates.⁸ One *New York Times* editorial said of the abrupt Belgian handover, "While the Belgians had done much to improve the economic level of native Africans in their charge, they had done literally nothing to introduce even the elements of political education."⁹

Lack of education contributed to chaos in the Congo, but a lack of military and economic infrastructure also disabled efforts at independent government. The Force

⁶ Harry Gilroy, "The Congo: from colony to independence," *The New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1960, sec. E6.; Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, First Mariner Books: New York, 1998, p. 37.

⁷ Kanza, *African Affairs*, 56.

⁸ Kanza, *African Affairs*, 56.

⁹ "Eruption in the Congo," *The New York Times*, July 8, 1960, sec. E20.

Publique, the Congolese army, consisted of indigenous enlisted men and Belgian officers. General Mobutu Sese Seko was the only Congolese officer at the time of the handover.¹⁰ This “short-sightedness” contributed to the chaos and misunderstandings between the Force Publique, Congo’s leaders and Belgian military officials.¹¹

Communication flaws contributed to Congolese instability, but the root of the problem was the economic system and “the exploitation methods of the former colonial power,” Kanza said.¹² The Congo’s natural resources created great wealth. The country produced 8 percent of the world’s copper, 8 percent of tin, 65 to 70 percent of cobalt and 75 percent of industrial diamonds.¹³ Demand for natural resources drew foreign investors to the region, not for a free market trade, but for independent claims of mines and resources. Western capitalists saw Katanga’s natural resources as a gold mine for Cold War technologies. Belgian interests in the Katanga independence frustrated Lumumba most. Mine owner Moise Tshombe and the province left the Democratic Republic of the Congo in summer of 1960. Lumumba knew they must regain the territory in order to create an economic base for a unified country. The ensuing conflict captured the attention of the world.¹⁴

May 1960 marked the first elections for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, six months after the Belgian government announced it would pull out of its African colony in response to widespread rioting. More than 100 parties took part, but the ultimate winner was the Movement National Congolaise, MNC, headed by Patrice Lumumba. The

¹⁰ Kanza, *African Affairs*, 57.

¹¹ Kanza, *African Affairs*, 57.

¹² Kanza, *African Affairs*, 58.

¹³ Kanza, *African Affairs*, 59.

¹⁴ Michela Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz, Living on the brink of disaster in the Congo*, Harpercollins: New York, 2002.

group favored centralized government and had support in four of six provinces. *The Afro American* ran a story by foreign correspondents Samuel Hoskins and Charles P. Howard, Sr., in 1961 that the five weeks Lumumba controlled the Congo, the country was “gripped by Lumumba fever.”¹⁵ But quickly, the paper reported, “Just as he was hailed as ‘savior’ in August and September, he became a ‘Congo Christ’ destined for crucifixion in late September and October.”¹⁶ In that time, the Force Publique mutinied, Katanga seceded and the country became chaos. Hoskins and Howard wrote, “The forces which shaped his cross were the rich prize of 20 billion dollars in uranium, gold, diamond and copper deposits in Katanga Province and the cold war power struggle these brought to the Congo.”¹⁷

Communication between Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and President Joseph Kasavubu broke down during the five weeks of their shared leadership. Lumumba called for international forces to intervene. The United Nations refused to fight to regain Katanga, which was backed by Belgium. *The New York Times* ran a special piece that discussed the Katanga problem. Harry Gilroy said:

If Mr. Tshombe proves to have a firm hold on his province with loyalty to Belgium and if Mr. Lumumba proved to have a similar grip on the rest of the Congo with his anti-Belgium attitude, the Belgian people will be all for going to the aid of the newly proclaimed state.¹⁸

An August 1960 article appeared in *The New York Times* that addressed the direct fears of the United States government that Lumumba would approach Soviets for aid, thus defying the United Nations, whose members were attempting to thwart a Soviet

¹⁵ Samuel Hoskins and Charles P. Howard, Sr., “Why they killed Patrice Lumumba,” *The Afro American*, March 4, 1961, sec. A9.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Harry Gilroy, “The Congo crisis as the Belgians see it,” *The New York Times*, July 17, 1960, E 138.

stronghold in Central Africa.¹⁹ Lumumba did contact the Soviet Union, and within weeks Russian twin-engine planes began to show up in Stanleyville to help create a stronger Congolese military.²⁰ *New York Times* columnist James Reston wrote in August, "So much is known of Lumumba's personal self-indulgence and political instability that he is becoming an embarrassment to the Russians, especially since his appeals to racist prejudice, which go against Communist ideology."²¹ These focuses on fears of communism created an idea of instability in the Congo that spurred some Americans to support American intervention in Lumumba's leadership.

Those ties led President Kasavubu to denounce Lumumba on September 5, 1960.²² A full coup d'état followed on September 14, 1960, when Lumumba was taken into custody and then sentenced to house arrest. Hoskins and Howard's piece said, "He just was not the type of person the West wanted as top man in the Congo Republic."²³ *The New York Times* ran a piece written by a Belgian officer that explained why Belgians so despised Lumumba. Gen. Mobutu was named leader three days after Lumumba's removal from office. African nations appealed to the United Nations for Lumumba's reinstatement, Hoskins and Howard reported. Ghana's president, Kwame Nkrumah, said that the Belgians had never intended for the Congolese to be free, asking for Lumumba to be reinstated.²⁴ But Western powers backed Belgium's claims against Lumumba. Nkrumah said, "Africa and the world still have no doubt where to place the blame."²⁵ Conditions in the Congo continued to worsen.

¹⁹ James Reston, "Mumbo Jumbo, God of the Congo..." *The New York Times*, Aug. 19, 1960, sec. A22.

²⁰ Hoskins and Howard, "Why they killed Patrice Lumumba," sec. A9.

²¹ Reston, "Mumbo Jumbo, God of the Congo..." sec. A22.

²² Kanza, *African Affairs*, 59.

²³ Hoskins and Howard, "Why they killed Patrice Lumumba," sec. A9.

²⁴ Hoskins and Howard, "Belgian Intrigue Backed," sec. A9.

²⁵ Ibid.

The Afro American announced on January 7 that the Congo ceased to exist, and that Belgium and the United States were paying military salaries from Col. Mobutu down the ranks. The reporter concluded that “the tragedy of the Congo is in the corruption and selfishness of some Congolese leaders. Lack of education is only part of the reason.”²⁶ Staff at the paper recognized the connections between the United States, the United Nations and Belgium as part of the disruption in the Congo, and the story cited the end of Lumumba’s reign as the final step on the path to chaos in the state.²⁷

U.S. officials had difficulty understanding the chaos, due in part to ignorance of the West about the Congo. Dana Adams Schmidt, an award-winning foreign correspondent, attempted to explain the Congo in her 1961 *New York Times* op-ed piece. She highlighted the issues of bountiful natural resources in the region, but reduced most of the fighting over them to local matters within the African state. Schmidt wrote, “The advantage to great mining interests, mainly Belgian, but also British and American, of a separate Katanga ruled by a pro-Western Premier, is evident. But any conniving to bring it about appears to have been done locally.”²⁸ The United States could not map out plans for Africa because of its inability to deal with racial inequalities at home. Schmidt said:

As the United States is drawn into a larger bilateral role in Africa and is tempted to offer advice to the whites and blacks there, it may be worth pondering a haughty remark recently made by an African visitor. “We won our independence in five years,” he told American Negro friends. “You have not achieved equality in 100 years.”²⁹

²⁶ “Republic of the Congo No Longer in Existence,” *The Afro American*, Jan. 7, 1961, sec. A19.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Dana Adams Schmidt, “Washington Depends on U.N. While Shaping Own Program for Africa,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 21, 1960, sec. E11.

²⁹ Ibid.

United Nations undersecretary Dr. Ralph J. Bunche, an African American, explained his work in the Congo to *Afro American* writers in January 1961. Bunche expressed optimism about the government structure and natural resources, but the reporter added to his commentary about racial segregation and Jim Crow areas of Africa. The journalist wrote, "He is convinced that there is little racial bitterness in Africa, nor has the demand for freedom followed a racial line."³⁰ Those opinions and others seemed to contrast with some later pieces in the same paper. One of the other interesting features in January was a brief editorial, which showed many African Americans thought Lumumba's imprisonment in the Congo was cushy, that he received preferential treatment in jail.³¹ These stories were exceptions to the later opinions of Lumumba's incarceration.

Story tone in the paper began to change as more information surfaced about Lumumba's removal from power. *Afro American* reporters wrote in the Jan. 21, 1961 edition that leaders of six African nations came together in a pact to urge the United Nations to reinstate Lumumba as Congo's president. Those countries said they would withdraw troops from the Congo regardless of the UN's action on the subject.³² However, the next week's paper showed that the UN did nothing. A permanent representative of the UN from the Soviet Union, Valerian A. Zorin, called a special session to consider a resolution demanding action in the Congo. The U.S.S.R. claimed aggressive action by the Belgians in the Republic of the Congo, which posed a "serious threat to international

³⁰ "Bunche takes issue with Congo's 'doom prophets,'" *The Afro American*, Jan. 14, 1961, sec. A9.

³¹ "Lumumba favored in Congo prison," *The Afro American*, Jan. 7, 1961, sec. A6.

³² "6 African states in military pact," *The Afro American*, Jan. 21, 1961, sec. A9.

peace and security.”³³ However, those efforts yielded nothing, and as the readers would soon learn, Lumumba was already dead.

Afro American attention turned to Africa in early February 1961 when an editorial commented on President Kennedy and Adlai Stevenson’s promises to reverse the U.S. role in African policy. The paper cited Kennedy’s inaugural statements, “To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our words that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny.”³⁴ However, the new president failed to send African American representatives to deal with these former colonies. *The Afro American* reacted strongly when the United States sent an all-white envoy to serve as diplomats in West Africa. The Kennedy administration recalled the one African American ambassador in Africa, Dr. John H. Morrow, ambassador to Guinea.³⁵ These actions received little attention in *The New York Times*.

Those issues on the domestic front and increasing information about the real situation in the Congo incited African American concern weeks after Kennedy took office. Three headlines near one another in mid-February spoke for the concerns of the African American community in Baltimore amid some of the Congo’s biggest trouble. “Gloom over Congo, civil war feared,” “Diplomats see need for change,” “Congo missionaries evacuated 2nd time,” and “Jimcrow hurts US image abroad, speaker declares,” shared the same page. Those reports included the first mention of Patrice Lumumba’s death or escape from prison.³⁶ The reports included additional questioning

³³ “UN fails to pass Congo resolution,” *The Afro American*, Jan. 28, 1961, sec. A5.

³⁴ “New African Policy?” *The Afro American*, Feb. 4, 1961, sec. A4.

³⁵ “U.S. is sending all white envoys to West Africa,” *The Afro American*, Feb. 18, 1961, sec. A7

³⁶ “Diplomats see need for change,” *The Afro American*, Feb. 18, 1961, sec. A9.

by Afro-Asian countries that asked if stories of prison escape were cover-ups for the premier's death at the hands of political opponents.³⁷

That information sent a shock wave through the African American community. Questions about Lumumba's death increased as February wore on. Dr. Lawrence Dunbar Reddick, a Fisk-educated African-American historian, addressed such questions, suggesting that the United States was guilty of "criminal negligence" for not protecting Lumumba.³⁸ Reports said Reddick had recently returned from his third trip to Africa, and felt the killing of Lumumba might have been planned by western powers. "If his killing was planned, and we don't know that it was, the demonstrators in Cairo, Rome and Cuba apparently believe that Belgian advisors to the Katanga government had something to do with it."³⁹ African Americans kept demanding an investigation.

Edward Peeks, a journalist, wrote a column about on the topic that also discussed Lumumba. Peeks boldly stated, "Make no mistake about it, he was murdered by the Katanga government of Uncle Toms at the bidding of the blood-sucking Belgians."⁴⁰ Support of Lumumba continued in a Feb. 25, 1961 international relations column, when Edward Peeks wrote, "This column never talked to an African who was opposed to the Lumumba government."⁴¹ Such affinity for Lumumba carried over in other parts of the country. An editorial slurring Lumumba in South Carolina's Charleston *News and Courier* met a heated protest, one *Afro American* article reported. The *News and Courier* story reported, "A Charlestonian who follows the news suggests that the reason why the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "Who is responsible for Lumumba's death?" *The Afro American*, Feb. 25, 1961, sec. A5

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Edward Peeks "The ghost of Lumumba will haunt our foreign service," *The Afro American*, Feb. 25, 1961, sec. A5.

⁴¹ Ibid.

body of Patrice Lumumba has not been produced in the Congo is that according to the local custom, the former premier may have been eaten by his enemies.”⁴²

African students in the Washington and New York protested after learning of the former premier’s death, *The Afro American* reported in March 1961. However, many white Americans wrote the activity off as communist in nature, a claim denied by those protesting.⁴³ James Tay, a Liberian student and president of the All African Students’ Association, protested in Chicago with dozens of others. He said, “To us Lumumba was a symbol of true African nationalism. He stood for unity of the Congo. He did not believe in a divided Congo.”⁴⁴ New York protestors stood outside the United Nations and Washington protestors picketed at the Belgian Embassy, according to the article. “‘You do not understand our aspirations and feelings,’ one student said. ‘If someone says something or does something you don’t like you call them a Communist.’”⁴⁵ That rhetoric was followed by the expressions of other African American students’ fear of being labeled communists.

The chaos in the United States and confusion about communist intentions in Africa stemmed from racial barriers created by civil rights conditions in the West. *The Afro American* quoted U.S. Senators Frank F. Moss, Gale McGee and Frank Church as saying, “Racial discrimination in the United States probably is the most important of all the natural barriers to a better understanding between Africa and this country.”⁴⁶ That story shared the page with a study about the amounts of money spent in Southern states

⁴² “Lumumba speculation draws Charleston protest,” *The Afro American*, March 4, 1961, sec. A9.

⁴³ “African students deny Lumumba demonstrations were Communist inspired,” *The Afro American*, March 4, 1961, sec. A9.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “Time running out,” *The Afro American*, March 4, 1961, sec. A7.

on education for African-American students and an article about desegregation of other public places. Letters to the editor on the same page brought to readers attention not just Lumumba's death, but also that of Harry Winston, an African American communist.⁴⁷ The letter's writer suggested that Americans refused to recognize African Americans with opposing viewpoints.

About the same time Hoskins and Howard's stories of Lumumba's life and death ran in *The Afro American*, the United Nations announced its creation of a three-person investigative team to look into Lumumba's death.⁴⁸ "Correspondents returning here from the Congo report that the murder of Lumumba has turned 80 percent of the people of the Congo (African) against the Kasavubu regime."⁴⁹ That led to Kasavubu's own fears of assassination. Other African nations, particularly Ghana, continued to pressure the United Nations to force Belgian military officials out of the Congo. A joint statement from Kennedy and Nkrumah in March 1961 said, "They also agreed that the nations of Africa should be supported in the development of their natural resources so as to benefit the continent as a whole and provide a promising future for their people in full and unfettering freedom."⁵⁰ Congolese Ambassador Damongo Dadet visited Kennedy the next month and told him they wanted independence from outside influence in the region, but that the country would need economic aid.⁵¹

Fears of communism and misunderstandings of Africa stemming from centuries of racism damaged independence efforts. The country continued to spiral out of control

⁴⁷ "What Afro readers say," *The Afro American*, March 4, 1961, sec. A7.

⁴⁸ Charles P. Howard, Sr. "Assassination fear plagues Kasavubu," *The Afro American*, March 11, 1961, sec. A9.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "Use force in Congo crisis if necessary – Nkrumah," *The Afro American*, March 18, 1961, sec. A9.

⁵¹ Lauter, Louis, "JFK meets French Congo ambassador," *The Afro American*, April 11, 1961, sec. A9.

under Mobutu's leadership. Even in death, Lumumba was regarded by the West as a threat to Congolese peace. Lumumba's book, *Congo My Country*, was published later that year in Belgium, raising public outcries about its authenticity and possible textual exploitation in translation or posthumous doctoring, according to Belgian Colin Legum.⁵² He said the text benefited neither Lumumba's admirers nor Belgian colonial authorities.⁵³ "They bear the unmistakable stamp of Lumumba's mind as I know it from my own conversations with him," he said.⁵⁴ The book described Lumumba's stance on the cry for help to the Soviets as one of desperation, not communist intent. Still, Western powers found roots of socialism in the African's move. Lumumba wrote, "I have no right to sleep as long as the people are not masters of their own destiny."⁵⁵

Debates within the African American community raged months longer than those in mainstream U.S. media. African representation in the United Nations, international racial policies and military force in former colonies received much attention in the *Afro American*. On June 30, the *Afro American* commemorated the one year anniversary of the Congo with a story headlined, "A year of misery in the Congo." Howard noted:

Since gaining independence, after nearly a century of Belgian dominance and rule, the Congo has seen secessionist movements, population dislocation, famine, tribal and factional fighting, and the murder of its first Prime Minister as well as some 20 odd members of the Parliament.⁵⁶

Those numbers made it impossible for the Congo to maintain stability, and African Americans continued to notice, protesting not only African policy, but Jim Crow laws.

⁵² Colin Legum, "The Life and Death of Patrice Lumumba," foreword in Patrice Lumumba, *Congo My Country* (London, 1962): vii.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Legum, *Congo, My Country*: xi.

⁵⁶ Charles P. Howard, Sr., "A year of misery in the Congo," *The Afro American*, July 29, 1961, sec. A9.

African Americans began to see the U.S. foreign policy reflected the country's domestic policy.

A look at the history of Lumumba's assassination and its effects on African Americans shows that a combination of factors contributed to racist policies at home and abroad. A fear of communism, a lack of understanding of African society and economic interests in the Congo drove the United States policy on the Congo's leadership. American mainstream and African American media showed the deterioration of the Congo situation, but black newspapers showed civil rights protests resulting from Western interference in the Congo.

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