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The American Empire in the Congo: The Assassination of Patrice Lumumba

By Nicholas Langer

American Cold War Imperialism spanned the globe, crossing oceans and continents to enforce the iron will of the United States. Following the Second World War, Africa and Asia were seeking to dislodge the influence of Imperialism. In the case of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh's rebels were sadly mistaken in believing that the United States would support their bid for independence from the French. The United States had overthrown the democratically elected president of Guatemala, along with Mohammed Mosadegh in Iran, and had inserted 15,000 advisors in support of the Diem puppet government in Vietnam by the time of the Congo Crisis in the early 1960's.¹ So, American intervention in the affairs of Third World countries was far from unprecedented by the time that Patrice Lumumba took power in the Congo and sought to extricate the country from the shadow of European colonialism. It is my argument that American involvement in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba followed the pattern of intervention which was well established in Latin America and elsewhere.

The Congo Crisis of 1960 represented the beginning of widespread western involvement in the newly independent Congo. In analyzing the Congo crisis we can see the final death throes of Belgian imperialism and the beginning of American involvement in the region, as well as the role that the United Nations would play in decolonization and the Cold War. The orthodox view argues that the United States maintained purely altruistic motives of decolonization and anti-communism in the Congo and that any unrest was the result of factors which the United States was unable to control. The revisionist standpoint argues the opposite: that the United States actively intervened in the Congo and promoted its own interests. These arguments introduce the general narrative of the Congo Crisis and the Cold War ideology of the United States in addition to validating the revisionist line of argument.

America in the Congo in Two Accounts: The Orthodox and the Revisionist

The article "The United States, Belgium, and the Congo Crisis of 1960," written by Lawrence Kaplan and published in *The Review of Politics* in 1967, represents a summation of the orthodox view of American involvement in the Congo Crisis.² The article was written well before the Church Committee hearing—a Senate committee which investigated American covert actions during the Cold War and which published their findings in 1975—that would confirm active American involvement in a plot to kill Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, and thus its arguments relied heavily on the official policy statements and news material that was available at the time. The main objective of Kaplan's argument seems to be an effort to apologize for American dedication to anti-colonialism to an imagined Belgian audience. In doing so, Kaplan paints American intentions as purely chivalrous and rejects any argument that the United States was acting on ulterior motives. He further washes America's hands of involvement in the breakdown of authority and places that blame back on the Belgians, who act as a foil to

¹ Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut, "Vietnamese Decolonization and the Origins of US Involvement 1960" (Lecture, *US Foreign Relations, 1945-1991*, University of California Merced, Merced, CA, September 26, 2013).

² Kaplan, Lawrence S. "The United States, Belgium, and the Congo Crisis of 1960," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Apr., 1967), 239-256.

America's strident support of anti-colonialism. Kaplan's sources and his analysis represent a quintessential orthodox interpretation of American involvement in the Congo.

In reviewing the American involvement in Congo, Kaplan hits upon three key issues that point to benevolent American intentions in the Congo. The first point is the American perception of itself as a product of colonialism and a strident supporter of former colonies in their struggle to decolonize. The United States perceived itself as "a new land, itself a product of colonialism, and thus incapable of resisting the claims of other former colonies" and that "America's first reaction instinctively would be, and had to be, to support the colony against the European colonizer."³ It is important to note that at no point in the article does Kaplan refute this claim that American policy makers sympathized with the plight of former colonies. It is thus reasonable to conclude that Kaplan was promoting this conception of American policy.

American sympathies for decolonization were meant to explain a second point: that the United States supported a United Nations presence in the Congo in order to facilitate the removal of Belgian influence and protect the sovereignty of the Congo. Kaplan contends that American policy in the Congo was threefold: "First was the recognition that the Belgian presence must be removed for the immediate future; second, that the United Nations fill the vacuum to be left by the Belgians as peacemakers and conduits for technical and economic aid; and third, that the unity of the Congo must be preserved at all costs."⁴ Thus, United Nations intervention perpetuated American altruism. Consequently, one may conclude that the United States was willing to allow the United Nations to take the lead from a beleaguered Belgium while at the same time stepping back, leaving the business of decolonization in the trusted hands of the international community.

Kaplan made clear in his third point that this deferment of power to the United Nations was not an abandonment of the Congo to the threatening evils of communism: "From the beginning American action was designed to restrain Soviet impulses," thus, "continued affirmation of the United Nations' actions in the Congo" was "certainly not an unwilling surrender to communist intrigue."⁵ So we see that Kaplan consistently promoted the idea that American action in the Congo was calculated to be benevolent in nature. First, the United States was naturally inclined to sympathize with the Congo as a former colony itself. Secondly, the United States promoted the replacement of Belgian troops by the United Nations in order to suspend Belgian meddling. Thirdly, the United Nations presence also represented the unwillingness of the United States to abandon the Congo to the evils of communism. In no way were the best interests of the Congo not in minds of American policy makers.

If Kaplan's "The United States, Belgium, and the Congo Crisis of 1960" represents the orthodox perspective, then David Gibbs' "Let us Forget Unpleasant Memories: The US State Department's Analysis of the Congo Crisis" represents a complete rejection of that orthodox viewpoint.⁶ "Let us Forget Unpleasant Memories" was written in response to a State Department compilation of documents published in Volume 14 of the *Foreign Relations* series.⁷ Gibbs is critical of the volume because of its lack of material concerning "US efforts to assassinate Patrice Lumumba."⁸ Gibbs, then, is responding to a sanitized version of events in

³ Kaplan, "The United States, Belgium, and the Congo Crisis of 1960," 245.

⁴ Ibid, 252.

⁵ Kaplan, "The United States, Belgium, and the Congo Crisis of 1960," 252.

⁶ Gibbs, David N. "Let us Forget Unpleasant Memories: The US State Department's Analysis of the Congo Crisis," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 33, 1 (1995), 175-180.

⁷ Ibid, 175-176.

⁸ Ibid.

the Congo, a version of events very similar to that espoused by Kaplan through the light of the Church Committee reports that exposed the involvement of the CIA in the plot to assassinate Lumumba. “Let us Forget Unpleasant Memories,” consequently, is a direct counter to the arguments made by Kaplan.

As far as the benevolence of American involvement in the Congo, Gibbs dispenses with that notion almost immediately. The assassination plot against Lumumba is the main criticism of the rosy orthodox narrative of the United States in the Congo. That “many of Lumumba’s ‘Congolese enemies’ were in fact working for the CIA” indicates clearly that the United States played an active role in the downfall of Lumumba, seriously distorting the image of the United States as a Good Samaritan.⁹ Thus, “there seems little doubt that the Congo was targeted by one of the largest covert operations in the history of the CIA” and that “Americans in both the CIA station and the embassy directly intervened in Congolese affairs.”¹⁰ The image of American benevolence is further complicated by the fact that the supposedly neutral “United Nations peacekeeping force... [acted] as a conduit for US influence.”¹¹ Granted, the US was concerned with stopping the spread of communism. However, other than that, it is clear that in actuality American actions deviated drastically from the orthodox narrative that Kaplan espoused.

From Gibbs’ article it is clear that the orthodox argument is a myth. Not only was the United States actively involved in the assassination of the Congolese Prime Minister but it completely acted counter to the orthodox priority of ensuring the independence of the Congo. The independence of the Congo was clearly not a priority as the United States used the United Nations to expel formal Belgian influence from the region and then proceeded to control its actions, replacing Belgian colonialism with American colonialism under the guise of noninvolvement. Gibbs’ radically differing perspective of events can be explained through the availability of the Church Committee reports to provide a counter argument to the orthodox argument. Gibbs’ main evidence, after all, was the committee reports, while Kaplan used the only evidence available to him at the time—besides writing during the height of the Cold War, without the benefit of hindsight.

The Details of American Involvement in the Assassination of Patrice Lumumba

Understanding how the assassination of Patrice Lumumba fits within the framework of American foreign interventions during the Cold War requires a firmer understanding of the logistical circumstances surrounding the assassination itself. The first issue that must be addressed is who actually performed the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. In the weeks leading to his assassination, Lumumba and his cabinet had been captured by the US and Belgian backed Mobutu Seko—leader of the separatist Katangan government. However, the direct role of the Belgian government in the assassination is extremely apparent; for as Lumumba and his cabinet were prepared for their execution, “[Commissioner Frans] Versheure [Belgian advisor to the Katangan police] removed the handcuffs” himself.¹² Furthermore, “the police [who carried out the execution] had Vigneron sten guns, [while] the [three Belgian] soldiers FAL rifles.”¹³

⁹ Gibbs, “Let us Forget Unpleasant Memories”, 175.

¹⁰ Ibid, 179.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ludo De Witte “The Final Hours of Patrice Lumumba, Maurice Mpolo, and Joseph Okito,” (1961), in *Africa and the West: A documentary History: Volume 2: From Colonialism to Independence, 1875 to the Present*, ed. William Worger, Nancy Clark, and Edward Alpers. (Oxford University Press, USA; 2nd edition, 2010), 141.

¹³ Ibid.

This account, taken from the research of Belgian author Ludo de Witte, indicates clearly that the assassination of Patrice Lumumba was not carried out simply by some proxy of America's Belgian ally, but was committed with the express consent and participation of the Belgian government. While this evidence still does not directly implicate the United States in the killing of Lumumba, it does serve to place the United States at only a single degree of separation from the assassination.

The second which requires deeper understanding is the precise role the US played in the assassination of Lumumba. The Church Committee Senate investigation into American interventions abroad provides the most damning evidence of America's candid role in the assassination of Lumumba:

It is clear that the Director of Central Intelligence, Allen Dulles, authorized an assassination plot and that [strong] expressions of hostility toward Lumumba from the President and his national security assistant, followed immediately by CIA steps in the furtherance of an assassination operation against Lumumba, are part of a sequence of events that, at the least, make it appear that Dulles believed assassination was a permissible means of complying with pressure from the President to remove Lumumba from the political scene.¹⁴

This quote pertains to a planned assassination attempt that the CIA station chief in the Congo was authorized to carry out. However, the plan was never carried out by the CIA but by Mobutu Seko. This would seem to absolve the United States from involvement in the assassination via plausible deniability, except for the fact that "the day after Mobutu's coup, the [CIA] Station Officer reported that he was serving as an advisor to a Congolese effort to 'eliminate' Lumumba..."¹⁵ This clear indication of involvement with the Seko regime, then, throws open the veil of plausible deniability. Far from only talking about assassinating Lumumba, the United States had provided personnel to advise the would-be assassins.

Although the nature of American involvement in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba is clear, the motivations for his removal remain less so. If we were to follow the orthodox line of argument, we would assume that Patrice Lumumba was threatening to move towards communism or had made overtures to the Soviet Union that would indicate that the Congo was on the path toward becoming a Soviet proxy. But the revisionist line of argument would consider that Lumumba was motivated by nationalism and that he was simply adhering to the path that would lead to a Congo independent of western colonial influences. The final lines of Lumumba's farewell letter to his wife suggest the extent to which his actions were motivated purely by nationalism: "Do not weep for me, my dear wife. I know that my country, which is suffering so much, will know how to defend its independence and its liberty. Long live the Congo! Long live Africa!"¹⁶ Nowhere does Lumumba mention a forthcoming workers uprising that would vindicate his death, which one might expect in a hardline communist revolutionary. Rather, he speaks of the liberty of his country as a whole.

¹⁴ United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities. *Church Committee Reports*. "Interim Report: Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders." AARC Public Library. November 20, 1975. 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁶ "Patrice Lumumba Writes his last letter to his wife." 1961, *Africa and the West: A documentary History: Volume 2: From Colonialism to Independence, 1875 to the Present*. Edited by: William Worger, Nancy Clark, and Edward Alpers. Oxford University Press, USA; 2nd edition, 2010. 141.

The position of Belgian security forces in the Congo further refutes any allegation of Lumumba holding communist sympathies or of a Soviet threat existing in the Congo. Such a position comes from Colonel Vanderwalle, who was head of the Belgian Colonial Intelligence Service during the Congo Crisis, for he “openly [dismissed]...even the existence of a ‘Soviet threat’ in the Congo at the time.”¹⁷ This situation, then, would seem to fly in the face of any stated American foreign policy position. Lumumba did not represent an apparent communist or Soviet threat, so why would the United States have an interest in intervening in the Congo? To understand American motivation to intervene in the Congo—as well as the tactics involved—we shall now turn to the pattern of American intervention in Latin America. The example of Latin America will serve to shed some light on the methodologies and reasoning behind American intervention in the Third World at the time of the Congo Crisis.

Assassination in Context: Latin America as Microcosm for US Doctrine

Taken without larger context, the reasoning behind the American assassination of Patrice Lumumba is murky at best. However, when we examine Lumumba’s assassination in light of Latin America, the reasoning behind the assassination seems more congruent with broader American foreign policy. Latin America had long been the workshop of American intervention abroad. The development and execution of American interventions in Latin America is the subject of Greg Grandin’s book *Empires Workshop* in which he explores the process through which the United States created its strategy for interacting with the Third World. As we will also see, the techniques that were being developed in Latin America during the Cold war were also applied in the Congo to assassinate Lumumba.

By the time Lumumba was assassinated, the United States already had a strong precedent of intervening when regimes began to take any leftward leaning action. Through this lens we can see that the reasoning behind the assassination of Patrice Lumumba was similar to the reasoning employed to justify earlier interventions in Latin America. Such was the case in 1954 when the US “[executed] its first full-scale covert operation in Latin America.”¹⁸ Guatemalan president “[Arbenz’s] only crime [had been] to expropriate...fruit company land and legalize the communist party,” yet this was enough to justify American intervention.¹⁹ The action taken against Guatemala amounted to the establishment of a first strike doctrine in which any potential communist ally of the Soviet Union was ousted. Similarly, Lumumba had aroused suspicion by making diplomatic overtures to the Soviet Union in order to better withstand the encroachment of western imperialism. In fact, within a year of Lumumba’s assassination, President Kennedy reaffirmed the policy “to respond preemptively to potential communist subversion in the third world.”²⁰

As Grandin asserts, “extrajudicial assassinations,” of the kind Lumumba was trapped in, “were becoming a standard feature” of American intervention in the third world by the 1960’s.²¹ The assassination of Patrice Lumumba, then, was part of a trend of American interventionist

¹⁷ Bustin, Edouard. “Remembrance of Sins past: Unraveling the Murder of Patrice Lumumba,” *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 29, No. 93/94. 6.

¹⁸ Grandin, Greg. *Empires Workshop: Latin American, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. New York: Henry Holt and Company LLC, 2006. 43-43.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Grandin, Greg. *Empires Workshop: Latin American, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, 95.

²¹ Ibid,96.

action that continued well into the 1960's in both the Congo and Latin America. Therefore, assassinating Patrice Lumumba was in no way outside the norm of American action in the Third World. So if "throughout the 1960s, Latin America and Southeast Asia functioned as the two primary campuses for" American intervention in the Third World, as Grandin points out, the assassination of Patrice Lumumba may be seen simply as a field trip which proved that these lessons were applicable in Africa as well.²² Furthermore, it is easily conceivable to extrapolate that the techniques employed by the CIA in Latin America were exported to the Congo, where they were employed to similar effect.

Summation

From the orthodox perspective, the United States faced an immediate danger in the spread of communism, and thus the United States was morally justified in taking whatever action was necessary to arrest that spread. Furthermore, the United States represented hope for nations that were newly freed from their European colonial ties. American intervention in the Third World, then, was a clear-cut case of the United States looking out for weaker regimes that would otherwise fall to the dangers of communism and imperil the United States in the process. With the revisionist school, though, the lines are not so clear-cut. In the case of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, there was no real communist or Soviet threat to motivate American intervention in the first place. There was simply the predisposition to take action against any regime that had the potential to undermine American hegemony in a region that had gained precedence through constant American intervention in Latin America. The lessons learned in Latin America were carried over to American actions in the rest of the Third World and it is this connection that explains American intervention in the Congo. Taken in this context, it is completely reasonable to extrapolate the assassination of Patrice Lumumba as a continuation of the policy of removing any leader that refused to bow before the interests of the United States or its European allies.

²² Ibid,97.

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