

“Worth a Lot of Negro Votes”: Black Voters, Africa, and the 1960 Presidential Campaign

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In July 1960 some 280 African students awarded scholarships in the United States stood poised for an extraordinary opportunity. Four years of college would vault them into the educated elites of their countries and provide crucial intellectual infrastructure as their nations moved toward independence. The students had scholarships; their communities had raised money for expenses. Just one obstacle remained: passage to America. And as the start of the school year neared, their journey seemed in jeopardy. An organization dedicated to helping these students, the African-American Students Foundation (AASF), did not have the funds to bring them to the United States. Wealthier foundations said their money was committed elsewhere. When the AASF appealed to the U.S. State Department for help, officials consistently rejected their pleas. Yet when the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation pledged the funds needed to get the students to the United States, Senator Hugh Scott, a Pennsylvania Republican, strode onto the Senate floor to accuse “the long arm” of the Kennedy family of attempting to “take over the function of the Government in advance of an election.”¹

In that summer’s fiercely fought campaign for president of the United States, both candidates—John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon—sought the black vote, and both worried about alienating white southern voters. The “solid South” no longer seemed so solidly Democratic, in no small measure due to the pressures the civil rights movement put on the long-standing structure of white rule in the region. In this extraordinarily close contest, some of Kennedy’s advisers feared that explicit support for civil rights could cost them the election, while Nixon’s strategists hoped they might win as many as six southern states. The campaigns needed ways to appeal to black voters without alienating the increasingly unsolid South.

Kennedy’s decision to telephone Coretta Scott King on a late October day to offer sympathy for her jailed husband, reinforced by Robert Kennedy’s subsequent call to help secure Martin Luther King Jr.’s release, has become the campaign’s iconic event and a sto-

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¹ Statement by Sen. Hugh Scott, *Congressional Record*, 86 Cong., 2 sess., Aug. 17, 1960, pp. 16629–30.

ried explanation for the outcome of the election. The phone calls, the conventional recounting goes, endeared Kennedy to a skeptical black America and provided the critical boost for his ultimate victory. And Kennedy needed every vote he could get: he won New Jersey by just 22,091 votes; Missouri by 9,980; South Carolina by 9,571; and Illinois by a mere 8,858.²

Within days of the election, Senator Thruston B. Morton, the Republican National Committee chairman, was lamenting that Nixon had lost by polling only 10–12 percent of the black vote—an inaccurately low figure, but one that reinforced ideas about the importance of black voters. In time, the King phone calls and the candidates' physical appearance during the televised debates emerged to dominate the mythicized collective memory of the campaign. Although the story of the phone calls was at first situated in broad analyses that attributed Kennedy's win to a range of factors, over the years the phone calls received greater attention, particularly after the publication of Theodore White's *The Making of the President: 1960* (1962). White, while carefully noting that one could not identify any single decision or episode as the most important, rated Kennedy's decision to call as "among the most crucial of the [campaign's] last few weeks." When Harris Wofford, one of Kennedy's civil rights aides, published his account of the era, he offered a fuller rendition, filled with details about stratagems he used to get the phone call placed. Wofford's account made him critical to persuading Kennedy to make the call and by extension to winning the election; over the years the tale has been elaborated on in other places, often by participants highlighting their own roles. The story finally became canonized in Taylor Branch's *Parting the Waters*, which asserted that "two little phone calls about the welfare of a Negro preacher were a necessary cause of Democratic victory."³

Historians have often cited Branch's or Wofford's account to invoke the traditional narrative that the black vote was essential and that the phone calls were critical to shifting the black vote to Kennedy. As the presidential historian Robert Dallek wrote, "The Kennedy phone calls and Nixon's failure to do anything gave Jack a big advantage among blacks and may have helped swing five states—Delaware, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, and South Carolina—to his side." The story now is so entrenched that most textbooks, even if they devote only a few lines to the election, highlight the phone calls.⁴

Yet the focus on the phone calls marginalizes Kennedy's efforts throughout the campaign to use other appeals—promises of federal action on education and housing, pocket-book issues, and most strikingly, Africa—to secure the black vote without alienating the white southern vote. Trying to skirt the minefield of civil rights, Kennedy understood that there were different ways to make an appeal to, and gain the support of, black voters. The overriding emphasis on the phone calls has obscured those campaign efforts and re-

² "1960 Presidential Election," *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/historical-resources/archives/reference+desk/1960+presidential+election.htm>.

³ "What the Two Campaign Managers Said," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov. 19, 1960, p. 6; Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President: 1960* (New York, 1962), 321–23, esp. 323; Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (New York, 1980), 11–28; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years* (New York, 1988), 351–78, esp. 378. For more on participants' emphasis on their own roles, see Clifford M. Kuhn, "'There's a Footnote to History!': Memory and the History of Martin Luther King's October 1960 Arrest and Its Aftermath," *Journal of American History*, 84 (Sept. 1997), 583–95.

⁴ Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (Boston, 2003), 293. For textbook and survey accounts that emphasize the impact of the phone calls on the outcome of the election, see Alan Brinkley, *American History: A Survey* (Boston, 2007), 826; John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (Boston, 2000), 528–29; and Darlene Clark Hine et al., *The African-American Odyssey* (Upper Saddle River, 2003), 527.

duced the complexity of African American voting to an oversimplified equation: Kennedy called about King, so he won the black vote. Indeed, historical accounts of the election have neglected Kennedy's own emphases even as they have reduced black voters to men and women silently waiting for a phone call before they pulled the lever.

Perhaps most obscured has been Kennedy's attention to the Third World during the campaign and, in particular, his deliberate focus on Africa. Kennedy's interest in Africa was encouraged by black leaders who saw an opportunity to use the election's razor-thin closeness and a black voting population that seemed in play to prod both campaigns to greater action on issues of fundamental concern to black America—issues that in 1960 very much included Africa. Africa seemed on the rise that summer. From the end of the primaries to election day in November, more than a dozen African nations gained independence, and at the United Nations (UN) that September, seventeen new members from the continent assembled.⁵ With the confluence of African liberation struggles and the American civil rights movement, news about Africa filled the pages of the black press. The black diaspora supported African independence, a "Marshall Plan" of economic aid for Africa, expanded educational opportunities for Africans; even more, they wanted the nation's political leaders to support such opportunities as evidence that they supported civil rights in the United States. Senator Scott's heated charges of an unconstitutional takeover make sense given the backdrop of the day: Africa held real and symbolic importance to a black America whose votes were critical in a tight campaign.

Witnessing the powerful draw of Africa and the deep desire to improve lives there, during the campaign Kennedy referred to Africa hundreds of times—far more than he did to civil rights. For Kennedy, Africa was the newest frontier, one where he could burnish his Cold War credentials by enrolling newly independent states on the side of the West while making himself known as a candidate sympathetic to black Americans. The plight of the 280 African students provided Kennedy a welcome opportunity to promote the relatively noncontroversial program of improving African education while skirting the more problematic issue of just when independence from colonial rule should come in Africa. The need to enlist more black U.S. Foreign Service officers and the need to stop the Jim Crowing of African diplomats—thus resolving issues that created ill will in foreign relations as well as among black Americans at home—provided additional powerful themes for his campaign rhetoric and potent appeals to black Americans. With the Cold War at the forefront of most Americans' minds and equal treatment central to black voters, Kennedy adroitly used Africa to champion domestic black concerns in a foreign context. This episode, like others important to our expanding understanding of the relationship between the Cold War and civil rights, shows how the intertwining of the two reached into the most elemental aspects of American life—including choosing the nation's leader.⁶

Looking beyond the King calls offers one final insight, for while Kennedy's use of Africa provides another telling example of his political opportunism, it also helps reveal his more deeply held beliefs. International affairs, the Cold War, Third World nationalism, and the demise of colonialism far outranked domestic civil rights as issues of interest to

⁵ Frederick Cooper, "Decolonization in Africa: An Interpretation," in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates (New York, 1999), 576–77; "List of Member States," *United Nations Member States*, <http://www.un.org/members/list.shtml>.

⁶ Richard D. Mahoney, perhaps the scholar best versed in John F. Kennedy's African interests, early on noted his strategic use of Africa in the 1960 campaign. See Richard D. Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* (New York, 1983), 31. Others have since noted that use. See, for example, Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 296.

Kennedy, who genuinely appreciated the forces of nationalism and the desires for independence in the Third World and sought to steer America's relations with the broader world accordingly. It was no accident that Africa figured so prominently in his campaign speeches or that in the early months of his presidency Kennedy met with more African leaders than civil rights leaders, pushed harder for the Peace Corps than for civil rights legislation, and felt more comfortable with forces of nationalism than with activism for civil rights. The King phone call was a fleeting gesture; Africa was his interest and the place where he sought common ground with black America.

Prelude to the Campaign: "Brothers *of* the Skin and Brothers *beneath* the Skin"

By all accounts the New Deal brought about a seismic shift in African American voting patterns, as a majority of black voters changed from the Republican to the Democratic party. Even so, during the 1940s and 1950s black political support remained fluid. While black voters trended toward the Democrats, lingering warmth for the Republican party's legacy as the party of Abraham Lincoln combined with stark anger with the segregationist Dixiecrat wing of the Democratic party to leave potentially crucial numbers of black voters in play. Black voters had much to criticize in both political parties, and some strategists argued that the civil rights agenda could best be advanced if candidates from both parties believed that they needed to appeal to black voters—and that such appeals might make a difference.⁷

In the election of 1952, Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic candidate, secured as much as 79 percent of black votes; in 1956, again facing the now-incumbent Dwight D. Eisenhower, Stevenson fared less well and polled roughly 61 percent. In the wake of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, made by a Supreme Court led by the Eisenhower-appointed chief justice, Earl Warren, and with the country in the midst of an economic expansion, many black voters decided that the Democratic party, with its Dixiecrats, did not offer strong enough support for civil rights to keep their votes. Perhaps the most visible figure to shift his support was the New York Democratic congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr., but it is worth noting that both Martin Luther King Sr. and Martin Luther King Jr. voted for Eisenhower in 1956. The shifting numbers were reflected in off-year elections as well; a University of Michigan poll found African Americans in major cities voted 78 percent Democratic in 1954, but only 71 percent in 1958. There has been surprisingly little historical analysis of black voting in the 1940s and 1950s, which perhaps explains the vague yet widespread sense that black voters shifted in a smooth and linear continuum from Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal to Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 landslide, in which he received 94 percent of the black vote. Yet that sense belies an under-recognized fluidity until that 1964 election, when black voters became much more fixed in the Democratic column.⁸

The question for the candidates in 1960 was which way black voters were trending; intricately tied to it was which way white voters in the South were heading. In 1952 Stevenson had managed to carry just nine states, all below the Mason-Dixon line. In 1956 he had lost three of those (Louisiana, Kentucky, and West Virginia) while picking up only

⁷ See, for example, editorials in *Atlanta Daily World*, July 5, 1952, p. 6; and *ibid.*, July 12, 1952, p. 4.

⁸ For the Gallup Poll surveys, see James Wilson, "The Negro in American Politics: The Present," in *The American Negro Reference Book*, ed. John P. Davis (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), 439; and "The Negro Vote, Which Way?," editorial, *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 19, 1960, p. 10.

Missouri. Heading into the final weeks of the 1960 campaign, the South was in play, with most states apparently up for grabs. Gallup polling results based on interviews conducted a month before election day revealed a 47–46 percent lead for the Richard M. Nixon–Henry Cabot Lodge ticket among voters registered or planning to register in the South, while outside the South the John F. Kennedy–Lyndon B. Johnson ticket held a 50–45 percent lead. If those divisions held, one hundred years after Abraham Lincoln’s election and the coming of the Civil War, the result would be unprecedented: The Republican candidate would run strongest in the South, and the Democratic candidate strongest elsewhere. “The South is torn this fall, possibly as never before, between old Democratic loyalties and new Republican leanings,” began a *Wall Street Journal* analysis headed “Dixie’s Indecision” published just weeks before the election. “Surprising numbers of Southerners find themselves still searching their souls to reach a decision.”⁹

How to secure black votes while not alienating southern white voters became a delicate yet critical balancing act for the candidates. Positions on civil rights were fraught with deep meaning and held enormous implications for the campaigns. Notwithstanding the disturbing racial views revealed on his White House tapes, Nixon stood as something of a racial liberal in the Eisenhower administration. Perhaps his biggest political liability on civil rights was his association with that very administration; by 1960 most black voters believed it had failed to lead a strong enough charge for civil rights during its eight years in office. The *Chicago Defender*, perhaps the nation’s leading black newspaper, summed up the Eisenhower record this way: “[It] has nothing to recommend it to posterity. It matters little how much the President waxes in eloquence on that point, he will never be able to blot out the glaring, colossal blunders of his Administration.”¹⁰

Yet Nixon himself had offered stronger support, becoming the administration’s leading spokesman on civil rights. Nixon, who while still a congressman had been granted honorary membership by a local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was one of the few administration officials to endorse the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, had energetically supported the Civil Rights Act of 1957, and had chaired the President’s Committee on Government Contracts, which investigated charges of racial discrimination in federally related employment and sponsored educational campaigns in the business community to promote equal opportunity. Then, with prodding from his rival, New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, at the GOP convention in July 1960 Nixon used his influence as the nominee to strengthen the Republican civil rights plank so it largely matched the one adopted earlier by the Democratic convention.¹¹

On the other side, Kennedy offered no strong civil rights record, as most biographers have noted. In the wake of his failed bid for the vice presidential nomination at the 1956 Democratic National Convention, Kennedy in fact strove to bolster his standing among powerful southern Democrats by steering a ruthlessly political course, seeking, in the words of Robert Dallek, “a strategy for accommodating all factions of the Democrat party on civil rights.” Doing so left Kennedy at best equivocating on the 1957 civil rights bill, at worst pandering to his party’s most extreme segregationist elements. His meetings and

⁹ “Nixon Running ahead of Kennedy in South,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 28, 1960, p. 2; “Dixie’s Indecision,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 18, 1960, p. 1.

¹⁰ “To-Morrow—Day of Decision,” editorial, *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 7, 1960, p. 14.

¹¹ Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941* (New York, 1997), 72–74; White, *Making of the President*, 203–4.



Vice President Richard M. Nixon attends Ghana's independence celebration in March 1957. Nixon, pictured here with his wife, Pat Nixon, and Finance Minister K. A. Gbedemah of Ghana, believed the United States needed to support newly independent African countries in order to block Communist influences on them. *Courtesy National Archives, photo no. 306-RNT-12-16.*

alliances with segregationist southerners, including a breakfast meeting with Gov. John Patterson of Alabama and the president of the Alabama White Citizens Council Sam Englehardt, made most black voters wary of his civil rights commitment. His naming the southern Democrat Lyndon Johnson as his running mate raised more suspicions.¹²

Both presidential contenders had more interest in international than domestic affairs and, notably, an unusually strong—especially for the United States of the 1950s—engagement with Africa. To Nixon and Kennedy and many others around the world in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Africa seemed to be on the march. Colonialism was crumbling; African delegates were flowing into the United Nations. For the two candidates, those changes were taking place in the all-important context of America's Cold War struggle. The historian Odd Arne Westad points out that with the collapse of the European empires, "decolonization meant that the future direction of the Third World was becoming an American responsibility, not a European one," and that conclusion certainly rang true for Nixon and Kennedy. While in principle the United States supported self-rule for

¹² Dallek, *Unfinished Life*, 215–17, esp. 215. Kennedy generally supported civil rights until his effort in 1956 to secure the vice-presidential nomination steered him toward alliances with segregationist southerners, according to Nick Bryant, *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality* (New York, 2006).

African nations, concerns about their susceptibility to Communism led U.S. officials to worry about the deleterious effects of “premature independence.”¹³

Since his three-week tour of Africa in 1957, highlighted by his attendance at Ghana’s independence celebrations in March, Nixon had become convinced that the continent was a Cold War battlefield that needed more American attention. “The course of [Africa’s] development, as its people continue to emerge from a colonial status and assume the responsibilities of independence and self-government,” Nixon advised, “could well prove to be the decisive factor in the conflict between forces of freedom and international communism.” Given this significance, he advocated the deployment of more resources and better-trained personnel to the continent. He detailed a series of recommendations for U.S. policy: The Defense Department and the International Cooperation Administration should give higher priority to their operations in Africa; the State Department should immediately strengthen its representation in Africa qualitatively and quantitatively; planning for diplomatic relations with the emerging African states should commence; and aid and information programs should be reviewed and revamped to gain the maximum political impact. Emphasizing the Communist threat throughout his report to the president, Nixon made clear his backing for U.S. actions that supported newly independent countries in order to “alleviate the conditions of want and instability on which communism breeds.”¹⁴

Within months Robert Cutler, special assistant to the president for national security affairs, was calling Nixon the “father” of a new African policy. While no dramatic policy changes took place, Nixon brought Africa into the conversation and supported creating the separate Bureau of African Affairs in the State Department to give the continent greater attention. Even as Nixon geared up his presidential campaign, he was in National Security Council (NSC) meetings declaring his obsession with Africa and, though there were two recently completed NSC papers on the continent, pushing for more attention while the Eisenhower team was still in office.¹⁵

Like Nixon, Kennedy found himself engaging Africa in the late 1950s. A few months after the vice president returned from the continent, Kennedy stood before the Senate to make a major speech on the Algerian crisis that provided him a platform on which he built a reputation as a friend to African peoples seeking freedom from colonialism. “The most powerful single force in the world today is neither communism nor capitalism, neither the H-bomb nor the guided missile,” declared Kennedy, “it is man’s eternal desire to be free and independent. The great enemy of that tremendous force of freedom is called, for want of a more precise term, imperialism—and today that means Soviet imperialism and, whether we like it or not, and though they are not to be equated, Western imperialism.” Urging both Paris and Washington to recognize the powerful tide of nationalism, he encouraged both governments to adjust their policies accordingly. If the United States was to secure the friendship of Africans, Arabs, and Asians, Kennedy concluded, the strength of the appeal must lie “in our traditional and deeply felt philosophy of freedom

¹³ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, Eng., 2005), 27.

¹⁴ Richard Nixon, “The Emergence of Africa: Report to President Eisenhower,” *State Department Bulletin*, April 22, 1957, pp. 635, 638; “Report to the President on the Vice President’s Visit to Africa,” April 5, 1957, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–57* (27 vols., Washington, 1985–1993), XVIII, 65–66.

¹⁵ Memorandum of Discussion of the National Security Council, Aug. 22, 1957, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–57*, XVIII, 72; Memorandum of Discussion of the National Security Council, April 14, 1960, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–60* (19 vols., Washington, 1986–1996), XIV, 126–28.

and independence for all peoples everywhere.” The speech resulted in sharp criticism from the French government of Charles de Gaulle and the Eisenhower administration, but it secured Kennedy a reputation for sympathy with the emerging Third World.¹⁶

Kennedy’s concern about African independence, part of a long-standing interest in colonialism and nationalism, was political more than moral: colonialism’s demise was a stark reality to face, not a moral policy to pursue. In many respects this viewpoint mirrored his position on civil rights. Yet the lack of interest in Africa by his fellow senators, even in the face of the continent’s rapidly changing circumstances, meant that by May 1959 he was chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s new subcommittee on Africa. While the subcommittee rarely met, Kennedy used the position to political advantage in public appearances and speeches. At any likely opportunity he mentioned his chairmanship as a way to advance his profile in foreign affairs and to highlight his connection to Africa and the Third World. By late 1959 he had crafted the general outline of his stump speech on Africa, in which he spoke sympathetically about Africans’ desires for a better standard of living and the opportunity to govern their own affairs. Like Nixon, Kennedy believed that America must make the political decision to assist Africa, arguing that taking such action would in turn aid the United States in a world where the balance of power was shifting “into the hands of the two-thirds of the world’s people who want to share what the one-third has already taken for granted.” He initially offered two main proposals: an “Educational Development Fund” that would emphasize the exchange of students, teachers, and trained personnel, thereby “opening our college doors to several times as many African students as now come over,” and a multinational economic development fund to provide financial help for investment and development. Kennedy soon strengthened his emphasis on the Cold War threat posed by expanding Soviet inroads into Africa and added a proposal for food aid—to alleviate conditions of want pointed out by Nixon—to his program of education and capital, so by early 1960 he offered a comprehensive outline for working with Africa.¹⁷

As Nixon and Kennedy focused attention on the Cold War struggle in Africa and rising Third World nationalism, interest in Africa was sweeping through other parts of America. The tide of African nationalism and the increasing influence of African liberation struggles flowed across the Atlantic Ocean to the diaspora in America, reinvigorating historic connections. The images of Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah leading the march toward Ghana’s independence held deep meaning among black Americans; that he had graduated from the historically black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania generated even more pride and support.¹⁸

Indeed, the late 1950s saw a burgeoning black American relationship with Africa, one that promoted both symbolic and substantive connections. After Ghana’s independence ceremonies, attended by a broad representation of black American leaders, the *Baltimore Afro-American* told its readers, “With the increased importance of Africa in the world and the UN, those of us who are of African descent can take justifiable pride in the continent from which our forebears came. From now on we should refer to ourselves as Africans,

¹⁶ John F. Kennedy, “The Challenge of Imperialism: Algeria,” July 2, 1957, in *“Let the Word Go Forth”: The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy*, ed. Theodore Sorensen (New York, 1988), 331, 337; Mahoney, *JFK*, 20–26.

¹⁷ “Africa—The Coming Challenge,” Kennedy Remarks at Democratic Luncheon, Watertown, Wisc., Nov. 13, 1959, box 1030, John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Mass.); Remarks of John F. Kennedy at Saint Anselm’s College, Manchester, N.H., March 5, 1960, *ibid.*

¹⁸ See Marika Sherwood, *Kwame Nkrumah: The Years Abroad, 1935–1947* (Legon, Ghana, 1996).

rather than colored people or Afro-Americans or ‘Negroes’ when such designation becomes necessary.” When Nkrumah visited the United States in July 1958, palpable euphoria greeted him throughout black America. Over ten thousand people jammed the 369th AAA Group Armory in Harlem to celebrate Nkrumah, and there Ralph Bunche praised him for his leadership of Ghana and his inspiration to people of African descent everywhere.

We salute you because you are a true and living representation of our best hopes and ideals: of the determination we have to be accepted fully as equal beings, of the pride we have held and nurtured in our African origin, of the achievement of which we know we are capable given only opportunity, of the freedom in which we believe, of the dignity imperative to our stature as men. . . . But above all, Mr. Prime Minister, we embrace you because *you and your people* and *we are brothers*—brothers *of the skin* and brothers *beneath the skin*.¹⁹

Two nights later at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel a glittering crowd of politicians, diplomats, business executives, and black leaders gathered to honor Nkrumah. Lester Granger, executive secretary of the National Urban League, voiced what was on many people’s minds: “Between Little Rock, Arkansas, and Accra, Ghana, 8,000 miles of land and sea stretch. But there is no more than the whisper of a bird’s breath between the hopes and aspirations of the black citizens in Arkansas in the Deep South and the triumph and expectations of the black men and women of Ghana who walk the streets of Ghana tall and proud.”²⁰

With many drawing parallels and emphasizing links in the struggle for freedom and equality on both sides of the Atlantic, black leaders saw issues on which to press for action. On the broadest scale they sometimes called for a “Marshall Plan” for Africa. More regularly, though, specific issues drew support: more aid for African education and students; greater use of black Americans as diplomats in Africa; an end to Jim Crow treatment of African diplomats working at the UN or at embassies in Washington; stronger U.S. backing of African independence. Those issues resonated in black America, reflecting the domestic struggle to end racial discrimination and gain fair economic opportunity.

Personalities and personal contacts further strengthened the mushrooming ties and mutual concerns. Rivaling Nkrumah for visibility in America was the Kenyan labor leader and politician Tom Mboya. Under the auspices of the American Committee on Africa (ACOA), the charismatic Mboya first came to the United States in 1956, seeking to present a more positive image of Kenyans than the ones promulgated by the British during the Mau Mau war and hoping to build support for Kenyan independence. Mboya gave lectures, developed contacts with labor leaders, and sought aid for higher education for Kenyans. In April 1959 ACOA sponsored him on another U.S. speaking tour, in which he gave close to one hundred speeches in thirty-seven days. While again seeking support for Kenyan nationalists, Mboya also hammered labor leaders and chatted up educational administrators about the desperate need for an educated class in a country rapidly moving

¹⁹ “Proudly We Can Be Africans,” editorial, *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 6, 1957, p. 4; Ralph Bunche, “Introduction of Kwame Nkrumah,” speech, July 27, 1958, box 52, Ralph J. Bunche Papers (Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles). Emphasis in original.

²⁰ Lester Granger, “Welcoming Remarks,” speech, July 29, 1958, box 39, series 1, part I, Records of the National Urban League (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.). For more on expanding links between black Americans and Africa, see James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935–1961* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 150–240; and Kevin K. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill, 2006), 77–178.

toward independence. Just a tiny percentage of African students made it as far as secondary school, and only a mere handful went farther. In 1959 the Kenyan government was offering financial assistance for higher education to only 451 Africans—out of a population of 6 million. No African could receive a liberal arts education in Kenya. The inequities of the situation, growing support for educational exchanges, and Mboya's passionate convictions persuaded many individuals and institutions to support Mboya's scholarship drive.²¹

Standing out among those who wanted to help were black Americans, who undertook significant efforts to help African students at a time when they themselves faced huge odds against going to college. In 1960, fewer than one in three adult black Americans had a high school diploma; more than 93 percent of 18–24-year-olds were not enrolled in college. Nevertheless, a growing number of men and women invested their time and money in helping African students gain access to American higher education.²²

Even those with pressing demands on their time and resources helped the cause. Martin Luther King Jr., for example, kept up ongoing efforts to aid Kenyan students. When Mboya informed the civil rights leader that Tuskegee Institute had accepted the Kenyan student Nicholas Raballa, but that Raballa needed nearly \$1,000 for expenses while at the school, King promised that his Dexter Avenue Baptist Church would provide half the needed money and his two-year-old civil rights organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the other half. King also met and worked with Dr. Julius Gikonyo Kiano, an economics professor and future Kenyan government minister who accompanied Mboya on his 1959 trip. King happily informed the Kenyan of arrangements to provide \$20 a month for two students' expenses and of his efforts to ascertain from other ministers what commitments they could offer. By the end of the year King wrote in high spirits that he had found enough support for five Kenyan students to study at Alabama State College. The Montgomery Improvement Association would provide for two students, King's congregation and Ralph Abernathy's First Baptist Church for one each, and a local club for one more. King held out hope that other local groups might make contracts to support three more students. King, increasingly engaged with African issues, in upcoming months sent out appeals for ACOA's Africa Defense and Aid Fund and served again as honorary chairman of ACOA's annual Africa Freedom Day.²³

Such positive responses helped convince Mboya and William X. Scheinman, an ACOA board member and president of an aircraft hydraulic equipment company, to organize

²¹ Mansfield Irving Smith, "The East African Airlifts of 1959, 1960, and 1961" (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1966), 21–22; Douglas Williams to editor, *New York Times*, Sept. 3, 1959, clipping, box 3, Jackie Robinson Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress); William Scheinman to editor, *New York Times*, Sept. 10, 1959, *ibid.*

²² In comparison, roughly 60% of adult white men and women had a high school diploma, and among white 18–24-year-olds 1 in every 6.5 was enrolled in college. Mabel M. Smythe, ed., *The Black American Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, 1976), 418; Jessie Carney Smith and Carrell Peterson Horton, eds., *Historical Statistics of Black America* (New York, 1995), 624–25.

²³ Tom Mboya to Martin Luther King Jr., June 16, 1959, box 26A, Papers of Martin Luther King Jr. (Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University, Boston, Mass.); King to Mboya, July 8, 1959, *ibid.*; King to William Scheinman, Aug. 18, 1959, box 32, *ibid.*; King to Julius Kiano, Aug. 19, 1959, box 26A, *ibid.*; King to Kiano, Nov. 30, 1959, box 29, *ibid.*; Tenisha Armstrong et al., eds., *Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. V: *Threshold of a New Decade, January 1959–December 1960* (Berkeley, 2005), 320–21; Francis Njubi Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions: African Americans against Apartheid, 1946–1994* (Bloomington, 2004), 37–38. Throughout black America there were efforts to support individual African students or organizations aiding African education. For support of individuals, see, for example, box 83, part II, series 1, Records of the National Urban League; for support for organizations, see "American Council of African Education, 1949–1960" folder, box 12, Papers of Roy Wilkins (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).



On both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, black leaders recognized the need for aid to African education. With the encouragement of American civil rights leaders such as A. Philip Randolph, the Kenyan Tom Mboya organized the African-American Students Foundation (AASF), which awarded Kenyan students scholarships for study in the United States. This photograph shows the Kenyan students arriving at Idlewild Airport in New York in September 1959 as participants in the first "African Airlift." *Photo by Daniel Nilva for the African-American Students Foundation. Courtesy Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Jackie Robinson Papers.*

the African-American Students Foundation. So did direct encouragement from fellow labor leader A. Philip Randolph, who encouraged Mboya with his belief that "the Negro citizens of America are keenly interested in the success of this movement [to aid African students] because of our African roots." After some initial juggling, Frank C. Montero, a labor and public relations expert, became AASF president, Scheinman assumed the vice presidency, and Theodore W. Kheel, president of the National Urban League, became secretary-treasurer. Board members included the singer Harry Belafonte, the actor Sidney Poitier, Ralph Bunche's wife, Ruth Bunche, and the African nationalist leaders Mboya and Julius Nyerere.²⁴

In Nairobi Mboya and Kiano joined forces with a third Kenyan, Kariuki Njiiri, to identify Kenyan students who would form the nucleus of the first "African Airlift." They awarded scholarships to 39 students who, along with an almost equal number of candidates who had made private arrangements, filled the 81 seats available on the charter plane. Through a fund-raising effort headed by Belafonte, Poitier, and baseball legend Jackie Robinson, AASF raised \$35,000 from eight thousand contributors for the trans-

²⁴ Smith, "East African Airlifts of 1959, 1960, and 1961," 22–25; David Goldsworthy, *Tom Mboya: The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget* (London, 1982), 118–20; A. Philip Randolph to Mboya, Oct. 14, 1959, box 18, Records of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).

atlantic transportation. How important was the fund raising? The charter aircraft alone cost approximately \$330 per person in a nation where Africans earned a per capita income of \$84 a year. More than five thousand exuberant Kenyans gathered at the airport to send off the students.²⁵

In its appeals for money, AASF had sought federal support, hoping to avoid the high cost of commercial carriers by using the government's Military Air Transport Service (MATS). AASF recruited Rep. Charles Diggs, a Michigan Democrat and one of the nation's four black congressmen, knowing of his "keen interest in Africa and close personal relationship with Tom [Mboya]," to lobby the State Department to support the request. Yet during that 1959–1960 academic year just 219 African students studied on U.S. government-funded scholarships; a meager 34 more received partial aid. Fewer than 150 students from south of the Sahara received full support. William B. Macomber Jr., the assistant secretary for congressional relations in the State Department, informed Diggs that under existing regulations MATS provided transportation to those not on official business only when no commercial transport was available, and even then costs had to be reimbursed. Further, lest Diggs think that the State Department had its own deep funding, the department planned for only 330 participants in educational exchanges from Africa for 1960, and privileging the AASF students would place an undue emphasis on Kenya. The U.S. government, despite being locked in a struggle for the hearts and minds of the world's people, had little assistance to offer Africans.²⁶

The Cold War, Campaigns, and Africa: "An Index of Future Domestic and International Policies"

Both the Cold War and presidential politics had the ability to change the dynamics of any situation, and in 1960 both were present in full force. That summer the Cold War was in a particularly deep freeze; in May Soviet air defenses had shot down an American U-2 spy plane, and plans for a May summit meeting of the two nations' leaders then collapsed. The Cold War, at the very forefront of the Eisenhower administration's concerns, had by this time become inextricably bound up with the worldwide struggle against the color line. World War II had internationalized questions of race, and in the Cold War that followed, policy makers understood that racial discrimination in the United States affected the nation's ability to carry out its foreign policy abroad.²⁷

²⁵ Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, and Jackie Robinson appeal letter, Aug. 24, 1959, box 3, Robinson Papers; Smith, "East African Airlifts of 1959, 1960, and 1961," 25–43. Barack Obama wrote that his father "had been selected by Kenyan leaders and American sponsors to attend a university in the United States," but a list of the students who landed in New York on September 9, 1959, does not contain the name of the elder Obama. Tom Shachtman, working in the African-American Students Foundation (AASF) papers for a book on the airlifts, has found that the elder Obama came in 1959 with support from the AASF but appears to have been routed a different way as he made his way to the University of Hawaii. Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York, 1995), 9; "Eighty-One Kenya Airlift Students Arrived New York Sept. 9th 1959," box 3, Robinson Papers; Tom Shachtman telephone interview by James H. Meriwether, Aug. 19, 2008, notes (confirmed via e-mail by Shachtman) (in James H. Meriwether's possession).

²⁶ Scheinman to Charles Diggs, June 29, 1959, attached to Diggs to William Macomber, July 2, 1959, 511.45R3/7–259, box 2141, Central Decimal File, Records of the Department of State, 1955–1959, RG 59 (National Archives II, College Park, Md.); Macomber to Diggs, July 16, 1959, 511.45R3/7–1659, *ibid.*; "African Students in the United States," *Africa Report*, 6 (March 1961), 8–9.

²⁷ On the Cold War and the civil rights struggle, see two essential works: Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); and Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2002). On the collapse of the May 1960 summit, see Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–1984* (New York, 1985), 206–7.

As more and more African nations gained independence, the ill will generated by American racial discrimination had potentially damaging ramifications throughout the world's second-largest continent. Freedom struggles in Africa and Asia forced America's political leadership to deal with changing facts, and relations with the emerging nations took on heightened importance as the "free world" fought to contain Communism. While efforts to improve America's racial image were underway by the late 1940s, not until the 1960 election did both parties' candidates make the case that the United States should not just improve its racial policies and practices at home but also identify with the rising tide of nationalism and the emerging nations of the world.

Adding urgency to the situation, by 1960 Soviet leaders were making a stronger push for influence in Africa. They planned to more than double the number of African students studying in the Soviet Union from an estimated 350 in 1959–1960 to 775 in 1960–1961. Egypt sent by far the most students, but 76 came from Ghana, another 62 from Guinea, and a smattering of others from around the continent. As more and more nations became independent, the number of Africans able to go to the Soviet Union would only rise. In February 1960 Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev announced his country's intention to bring thousands of African, Asian, and Latin American students to study at the new Peoples' Friendship University in Moscow. A few months later even more disturbing scenarios plagued U.S. officials as the newly independent Congo plunged into chaos, and Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba appealed to the Soviet Union for assistance. The thought of Soviet penetration into the mineral-rich Congo, a country that bordered nine others in the heart of Africa, caused intense worry in Washington.²⁸

Although the Cold War framed and limited acceptable protest in the United States, it also provided an opening for civil rights activists to argue that America's image would suffer as long as racial discrimination persisted. Civil rights leaders became adept at pressing their agenda using the language and concerns of the day. When African American leaders sought government action on African issues, they typically couched their efforts in Cold War language. As AASF expanded its airlift efforts, it gave more prominence to the language of the Cold War. Belafonte, Poitier, and Robinson announced the goal for the 1960 academic year: to raise \$121,000 to bring 243 students from Kenya primarily, but also Nyasaland (now Malawi), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Uganda, and Tanganyika and Zanzibar (both now parts of Tanzania). Writing to Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Joseph C. Satterthwaite, AASF extolled the potential public relations gains for the United States, noting the "great and dramatically favorable response throughout all of Africa if it could be arranged so that the students were flown from Nairobi to New York in American Air Force planes." At a "negligible cost" the U.S. government would support legitimate African aspirations and needs and thereby "provide an answer, widely public and throughout the world, to the Soviet challenge in the coming struggle for Africa."²⁹

Of course, Africa competed with Cold War crises elsewhere, and some Washington officials still saw little need to change historic patterns of following the European colonial

²⁸ On renewed Soviet interest in the Third World, see Westad, *Global Cold War*, 66–72; on students in Moscow, see Seymour Rosen, *Soviet Training Programs for Africa*, U.S. Office of Education bulletin no. 9 (Washington, 1963), 1–2.

²⁹ Harry Belafonte, Jackie Robinson, and Sidney Poitier appeal letter, Nov. 2, 1959, box 3, Robinson Papers; Scheinman to Joseph Satterthwaite, Nov. 18, 1959, box 1, Country Files 1951–1965, Lot and Office Files, Bureau of African Affairs, State Department Records.

powers' lead when it came to engaging Africa. Despite any number of educational, cultural, and aid programs supported by the government, Satterthwaite informed AASF that there was no basis for any branch of government to supply transportation to 243 African students.³⁰

Yet presidential campaign politics now began to influence events, as did persistent black American voices that sought more action on Africa, winning the continent an unaccustomed salience as the nation chose its leader. Repeatedly turned down at State, promoters of the airlift turned to Vice President Nixon, with his established interest in Africa and his explicit recommendation that the administration review African aid programs for their political influence. Jackie Robinson, now a newspaper columnist, civil rights advocate, and AASF board member, took the lead in trying to persuade the vice president.

That summer Robinson and Nixon stood at a crossroads in a relationship that had started when the two met at the 1952 Republican National Convention. Nixon eagerly sought Robinson's endorsement for his presidential campaign, knowing that the former ballplayer, having broken the color line in major league baseball, held a special place in the pantheon of black American heroes and remained black America's most visible icon. In the tight contest for president, Nixon believed that he needed support from black voters and that Robinson could help deliver it. Yet Robinson hesitated over which political party and candidate held the most promise for black Americans.³¹

Robinson's dilemma mirrored that of many African Americans who found much to criticize in both parties and both candidates. Most prominent African American leaders, celebrities, and newspapers backed the Democratic ticket, yet many black Americans still loyally supported the GOP. The most influential institution in black America, the church, was filled with Protestant ministers who disliked Kennedy's Catholicism—and Martin Luther King Sr. gave prominent voice to that opinion (his son, citing his position as head of the SCLC and as a civil rights leader, proclaimed a nonpartisan stance). The *Atlanta Daily World*, the city's black paper, and leading black Atlantans supported the Republican ticket, and Nixon ultimately carried the black vote in Atlanta.³²

Robinson had initially endorsed and campaigned for the candidate with the strongest civil rights record in either party, Democrat Hubert Humphrey. After Humphrey lost the nomination, Robinson remained unenthusiastic about Kennedy, and Nixon worked hard to win his trust. Robinson saw in Nixon a politician sympathetic to the campaign for civil rights, who might use his political clout on behalf of black Americans. He pressed the vice president for a stronger commitment to civil rights while Nixon tried to show he was a civil rights man without taking stands that might alienate conservative white southern voters.³³

Robinson's personal appeal to Nixon was deeply influenced by two major forces of the day: expanding links between black Americans and Africa and the global struggle

³⁰ Scheinman to Satterthwaite, Jan. 15, 1960, box 1, Country Files 1951–1965, Lot and Office Files, Bureau of African Affairs, State Department Records.

³¹ Jackie Robinson to Richard Nixon, May 18, 1960, box 3, Robinson Papers; David Falkner, *Great Time Coming: The Life of Jackie Robinson from Baseball to Birmingham* (New York, 1995), 261–66.

³² David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), 148–49; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 349–50; “The Nixon-Lodge Team Best Qualified to Lead Nation,” editorial, *Atlanta Daily World*, Oct. 7, 1960, p. 1; “Atlanta Lone Bright Spot in Dixie for GOP,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov. 19, 1960, p. 11.

³³ Falkner, *Great Time Coming*, 275–80; Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson: A Biography* (New York, 1997), 340–48.



The baseball legend Jackie Robinson, who backed efforts to bring African students to the United States, greets the first “African Airlift” arrivals in New York in September 1959. Robinson later urged presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon to support the 1960 airlifts, appealing to Nixon’s interest in courting black voters in the upcoming election. *Photo by Daniel Nilva for the African-American Students Foundation. Courtesy Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Jackie Robinson Papers.*

against white supremacy that was cresting even as American leaders focused on the struggle against Communism. As he sat down to write the vice president, the recent massacre of sixty-nine unarmed protesters by South African police at Sharpeville weighed heavily on Robinson’s mind. Just days before he had chaired a conference that launched an effort to boycott South African goods, where he spoke of the worldwide struggle against race supremacy and racial inequality and his view that “the fight against Jim Crow here is part of the same struggle in South Africa.” Robinson was by no means alone in his assessment. The *Crisis*, noting that Africans felt the same impatience with white supremacy, colonialism, exploitation, and discrimination as blacks in the United States, believed that the destinies of peoples on both sides of the Atlantic were coupled: “American Negroes take courage and hope from an independent Ghana and Guinea; revolts in the Congo stiffen the resolve of Africans in South Africa. Everywhere the colored peoples are resolved that the arrogance and the domination of whites must go.”³⁴

With questions of race now international in scope and with Communists exploiting the issue in a world that was mostly nonwhite, Robinson believed that the federal government needed to give better support to African—and African American—aspirations.

³⁴ Jackie Robinson, “Introduction,” in “Action Against Apartheid,” by American Committee on Africa (New York, 1960), Schomburg Center Clipping File, 004,657–3 (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, N.Y.); “Rising Tide of Color,” editorial, *Crisis*, May 1960, 306–7.

Robinson, who had personally contributed \$4,000 to the 1959 airlift, wrote Nixon that the 81 African students in that plane marked the largest number of African students ever brought to the United States at one time. Airlift publicity had led thousands of students throughout Africa to request the same opportunity: Was there no way the U.S. government could help? Robinson, knowing his audience and the Cold War imperatives, pointedly concluded by reminding Nixon that the airlift came at a “particularly propitious time because in the fall the Soviet Union will open a ‘University of Friendship of People’ in Moscow for the free education of 4,000 Africa, Asian, and Latin American students.”³⁵

Nixon, already concerned about Africa as a Cold War battlefield, faced a direct appeal from a man whose endorsement he wanted. Not surprisingly, he told Robinson that he supported student and leader exchange programs and that he would contact the State Department. But the air force still offered no free rides, and the State Department still had not budgeted for the expense; the answer came back: No money was available.³⁶

Unbowed, Robinson quickly telegraphed Nixon to emphasize again the many reasons the airlift deserved support; this time he also directly spotlighted the domestic stakes for the man who wanted to be the next president of the United States—stakes raised by a new era in the transnational relationship between blacks in America and Africa. “For the first time,” Robinson stressed, “American Negro leaders are demanding a program of government support for African education, independence and economic growth before [the] platform committees of both parties.” Lest Nixon fail to see the import of the connections forged in the crucible of the domestic civil rights movement and the African liberation struggles, Robinson made the links for him. “A bold State Department role in providing transportation for the 250 students would be [an] inestimable contribution to [the] growth of democracy in Africa *as well as tangible evidence of [an] administration’s dedication to civil rights since American Negroes regard such a program as paramount issue. In this year of political consciousness millions will see in the determination of this issue an index of future domestic and international policies.*” Robinson left Nixon with no doubt: help for these African students provided a barometer of his commitment to civil rights in the United States and a gauge for black voters heading to the polls in the fall.³⁷

African American leaders, adroitly invoking the weight of the black American vote in the tight election, sought to use politicians’ desire for that vote to advance their concerns about Africa. Yet even rallying Nixon to the cause by highlighting the urgency of their agenda for Africa did not bring the hoped-for progress. As in much U.S. policy making vis-à-vis Africa, seemingly nothing short of a full-bore crisis would prod the Eisenhower administration to action. Later in the summer such a crisis would be the upheaval in the Congo, which prompted Eisenhower’s staff secretary Andrew Goodpaster to write to Secretary of State Christian Herter in September that “the Congo crisis points up one of the world’s most urgent needs: The absence of trained and educated people to take over leadership and administration of the new African nations.” Goodpaster noted Belgium’s “outstandingly bad” record in failing to provide Congolese administrative personnel yet admitted that “the situation is highly critical everywhere” and that “the U.S. record to date in rising to the occasion has not been good.” Goodpaster also recognized what had by

³⁵ Robinson to Nixon, June 9, 1960, box 649, series 320, Richard M. Nixon Pre-Presidential Papers (National Archives and Records Administration—Pacific Region, Laguna Niguel, Calif.); “2 Young Men in East Africa Score Educational Bullseye,” *Chicago Daily News*, Aug. 11, 1960, clipping, box 3, Robinson Papers.

³⁶ Nixon to Robinson, June 23, 1960, box 649, series 320, Nixon Pre-Presidential Papers.

³⁷ Robinson to Nixon, July 11, 1960, *ibid.* Emphasis added.

then become evident: the United States had been slow to act “in spite of the fact that we have an asset few other nations, willing and able in this great need, can match—our own large negro population and the efforts they are so anxious to make in this regard.”³⁸

Yet in mid-July, with the Congo crisis just a week old and the Eisenhower administration uncommitted to broadening its support of student exchanges, the State Department offered no funds to AASF. When Scheinman and Montero met on July 13 with State Department officials, three hours of dialogue produced the same answer as before: nothing could be done. Mere weeks remained before the start of the academic year, and airlift supporters worried that classes might begin with the students left waiting in Kenya. With a rising sense of panic, AASF leaders brought back Mboya, who made a personal appeal to a conference on African education convened by the Phelps-Stokes Fund. Nevertheless, the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller foundations and a long-standing supporter of educational exchanges, the Institute of International Education (IIE), declined to offer any financial support. Hedging its bets and hoping to make the most of Mboya’s limited time, the AASF also sought appointments with members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Most declined. “After consulting with our State Department, which is not unaware of your problem, I have been advised that it does not look with favor on an airlift of foreign students at government expense,” responded Senator Alexander Wiley. “Therefore, much as I approve of encouraging exchange of foreign students, I cannot be of assistance to the Foundation in this matter.”³⁹

Yet one senator accepted a meeting: Kennedy, who saw an opportunity to act on his interest in African education and student exchanges while bolstering at little cost a weak record on civil rights with a strong stance on African issues. Just one month earlier Kennedy had stood before the African diplomatic corps in Washington and repeated his desire to “greatly increase the number of African students—future African leaders—brought to this country for university training.” The Kennedy campaign was also highlighting “the urgent need for program[s] of study for students from underdeveloped nations in the U.S. and educational assistance within underdeveloped nations.” The campaign paper on educational exchanges cited depressing statistics: 80 percent adult illiteracy in Africa; fewer than one-third of school-aged children attending school; only 260,000 students on the continent enrolled in secondary school. Not only were current exchange programs inadequate, those that existed were terribly skewed. During the 1959–1960 school year, out of roughly 35,700 undergraduate and graduate students from underdeveloped nations studying in the United States, 4,780 were from Taiwan, while just 2 came from the Congo, where independence dawned with fewer than thirty Congolese university graduates in that vast territory and not a single Congolese medical doctor, lawyer, engineer, or army officer.⁴⁰

Kennedy understood that efforts to broaden opportunities for education resonated deeply with black Americans, who had long fought—and were still fighting—for equal access to and treatment in classrooms throughout the United States. From the courtrooms of *Brown v. Board of Education* to the streets of Little Rock, Arkansas, black Americans

³⁸ Andrew Goodpaster to Christian Herter, Sept. 7, 1960, box 81, Subject Series, White House Central Files (Confidential File), 1953–1961 (Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kans.).

³⁹ Goldsworthy, *Tom Mboya*, 166–68; “The Facts on Grant to African Airlift Students—Summary,” background report prepared by Sen. Kennedy’s office, [Aug. 1960], box 1044, Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers.

⁴⁰ “Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Luncheon in Honor of the African Diplomatic Corps,” June 24, 1960, box 1030, Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers; “Educational Exchange,” box 993, *ibid.*



Senator John F. Kennedy and the Kenyan nationalist leader Tom Mboya speak to reporters after their meeting on July 26, 1960, in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. Mboya had asked Kennedy to intercede with the State Department for funds to transport African students to the United States. Instead, Kennedy secured funds from a charity his family controlled. *Photograph by Boston Herald American in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.*

had struggled to expand educational opportunity and to hold the nation to its avowed beliefs in uplift and equal opportunity. Now Kennedy had the chance to clear a way for Africans to study in the United States. That gesture would reverberate among black Americans, while few white voters would notice a few hundred African students enrolled in American colleges. Furthermore, the airlift offered a way to support Africa without explicitly engaging the controversial matter of exactly when African independence should come. That question was sensitive given concerns in Washington and the West over Africa's "readiness" for independence and its potential susceptibility to Communism—worries that intensified amidst the Congo's postindependence turmoil and Lumumba's turn to the Soviets for assistance. British success in portraying Kenyan fighters in the Mau Mau war as atavistic terrorists sowed fears about whether Kenya in particular was ready for self-governance. Education, however, provided a balm for all ills, one that Americans instinctively support and that even hard-line whites in Kenya were advocating, albeit as a way to delay the coming of independence.⁴¹

After Mboya, Montero, and Scheinman arrived at the Kennedy compound at Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, Mboya appealed to Kennedy to use his position as chair of the Sen-

⁴¹ Mary L. Dudziak, *Exporting American Dreams: Thurgood Marshall's African Journey* (New York, 2008).

ate Foreign Relations subcommittee on Africa to intercede with the State Department. Kennedy said that if the vice president had tried that tack and failed, he could do little more there. But the senator suggested that the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation, set up by his family, might be able to help. He telephoned Sargent Shriver, its executive director as well as the liaison between the Kennedy campaign's central operations and its civil rights section. After a brief conversation, Kennedy secured \$5,000 and the promise that the foundation would seek to secure the rest of the funds from other potential donors.⁴²

These events, while fortunate for the African students, marked a curious turn for Kennedy and the foundation. Established in 1946 in memory of the senator's oldest brother, who was killed during World War II, the foundation had as its mission, in the words of Senator Kennedy, "building and aiding schools and hospitals for underprivileged and handicapped children." That cause, dear to the Kennedy family largely because of the difficulties of John's retarded younger sister, Rosemary, became a way for Kennedy to handle regular pleas for help from people throughout the world who knew of his family wealth and political standing. He gently turned aside inquiries with the reply that he channeled his available funds through the foundation, sometimes adding that the foundation did not give grants to private individuals or that its work focused on the United States. Thus, when P. A. Mainardi of Naples, Italy, asked for assistance in February 1960 for an institution dedicated to the upbringing and education of poor boys, Kennedy regretted that his available money went to the foundation and its work with underprivileged and handicapped children in America. "Any exception," added Kennedy, "would be setting a precedent which the Foundation simply could not justify." Limited foundation funds meant that many worthy projects could not be funded. When Dean John C. Snyder of Harvard's School of Public Health solicited financial support for the creation of a residential international house for the school's students from around the world and their families, Kennedy supplied the name of the appropriate person to contact but warned that the foundation was "entering the research phase of its work with retarded children and is not making any new commitments at this time."⁴³

Despite the seeming limitations, five months later Kennedy managed in a five-minute phone call to secure a commitment for \$5,000 from the foundation to help pay for 280 African students to fly to the United States. Further, when Shriver made no progress in getting other foundations to commit money immediately, Kennedy told him that, in his opinion as a trustee, the foundation should fund the whole project. Within a fortnight the foundation pledged \$100,000 for the transport of three planeloads of African students, and on Friday, August 12, Shriver arranged to meet Montero and Scheinman the following Monday afternoon to wrap up details. Kennedy and the foundation asked one thing in return: that word of the funding be kept quiet, so as not to politicize the support.⁴⁴

In the heated atmosphere of the presidential campaign little remained quiet, nor did Kennedy really want it to. News spread as soon as AASF board members learned that funding for the airlift had been secured, for Robinson and the Nixon campaign remained in contact as the baseball hero inched toward his public endorsement. On Saturday, August

⁴² "Facts on Grant to African Airlift Students—Summary."

⁴³ John F. Kennedy to Eugenio Pazzini, Feb. 25, 1960, box 529, Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers; Kennedy to P. A. Mainardi, Feb. 9, 1960, *ibid.*; John Snyder to Kennedy, Jan. 8, 1960, *ibid.*; Kennedy to Snyder, Feb. 29, 1960, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ "Facts on Grant to African Airlift Students—Summary."

13, the State Department official William Macomber received an urgent phone call from Nixon campaign staffer James Shepley, who told Macomber that he was calling on behalf of the vice president. Shepley wanted the State Department to review the AASF request again.⁴⁵

Although Macomber asked for time to look into the situation, especially on a hot August Saturday in Washington, he called Shepley back that afternoon. Detailing the department's reluctance to support the airlift, Macomber assured Shepley that he would raise the issue with Undersecretary of State Douglas Dillon. Shepley pressed Macomber to act quickly, for in less than forty-eight hours Montero was to finish arrangements with the Kennedy Foundation. Macomber reached Dillon the next day, Sunday. Dillon claimed no prior knowledge of the AASF request, but he expressed certainty the department should be sympathetic to it. He instructed Robert H. Thayer, special assistant to the secretary for the coordination of international educational and cultural relations, to look into how to make funds available. Remarkably, by lunchtime Monday a year's worth of obstacles and objections, protestations and penury, melted away; Thayer found money. Armed with the good news, Thayer asked that Macomber inform Shepley and that Shepley himself tell Montero. Over the course of a weekend, the Nixon campaign not only dramatically reversed State Department policy, but received permission to bear the glad tidings.⁴⁶

Tuesday morning Senator Scott rushed to herald the State Department's decision to finance "Airlift—Africa 1960." The problem for Scott, a staunch Nixon campaigner and later the Senate Republican leader, was that AASF leaders had decided to accept the Kennedy Foundation grant—news not unknown to the Nixon people. During the frenetic weekend Shepley had repeatedly phoned Montero, with his last phone call early Monday afternoon—barely an hour before Montero was to meet with Shriver—confirming that the government would provide \$100,000 for the airlift. Shepley had pressed AASF to commit in return, but Montero and Scheinman chose to stay with the partner who brought them to the dance, informing Shepley and Thayer that they remained committed to the previous Kennedy Foundation pledge.⁴⁷

Accusations and counteraccusations fueled the ensuing political melee. Hearing of Scott's announcement, Montero and Scheinman sought out Robinson, whom they believed to be the source of the leak. But Robinson, on the verge of publicly endorsing Nixon, refused to change his Wednesday column for the *New York Post* that praised Nixon, Dillon, and Shepley for coming through with the grant. Montero and Scheinman responded with widely disseminated telegrams explaining that they had secured private financing only after the State Department had repeatedly rejected them, that they regretted Senator Scott's effort to reap political advantage from this nonpolitical education program, and that they hoped State would use the money offered to AASF for additional African students. Congressman Diggs weighed in with his own statement accusing the State Department of playing politics.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Macomber to J. William Fulbright, draft letter, [Aug. 19–21, 1960], box 649, series 320, Nixon Pre-Presidential Papers.

⁴⁶ Macomber to Fulbright, Aug. 22, 1960, box 1044, Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers.

⁴⁷ Office of Hugh Scott, press release, [Aug. 16, 1960], box 649, series 320, Nixon Pre-Presidential Papers; "Facts on Grant to African Airlift Students—Summary"; Scheinman to Fulbright, Aug. 19, 1960, box 1044, Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers.

⁴⁸ Frank Montero and Scheinman to Pierre Salinger, Aug. 16, 1960, box 1044, Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers; Charles Diggs, press release, Aug. 17, 1960, *ibid.*

Senator Scott, firing back, strode onto the Senate floor Wednesday afternoon and raised the stakes. “The long arm of the family of the junior senator from Massachusetts,” Scott charged, “has reached out and attempted to pluck this project from the United States Government.” Scott questioned the decision of AASF to accept the private foundation’s grant but expressed empathy; he could, he said, “understand the pressures brought about by the Kennedy people and their anxiety to take over the function of the Government in advance of an election.” Cognizant that charges of a constitutional conspiracy might not stick, Scott questioned as well “the apparent misuse of tax-exempt foundation money for blatant political purposes.”⁴⁹

Kennedy demanded the floor, calling Scott’s statement “the most unfair, distorted, and malignant attack I have heard in fourteen years in politics.” Kennedy defended the foundation’s role in the airlift, emphasizing that it had not sought the part but that when asked for help, “we felt something ought to be done. To waste 250 scholarships in this country, to waste \$200,000 these people had raised, to disappoint 250 students who hoped to come to this country, it certainly seemed to me, would be most unfortunate, and so we went ahead.” Noting that many more African students needed assistance, Kennedy recommended that “the \$100,000 Mr. Shepley was able to get from the State Department” be put to that good use.⁵⁰

At that point Arkansas senator J. William Fulbright, the Democratic chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, entered the fray. This long-standing supporter of international exchanges lamented his own “great difficulty” in obtaining funds, any funds, from the State Department the previous year to bring students from Cairo and demanded to know who Shepley was and how he had been able to convince the State Department to reverse its decision. Fulbright demanded that Secretary of State Herter answer that and a dozen other questions about what actions the department had taken, when, and why. State immediately began to justify its change of policy, confirming that the original AASF request had been denied but that after the AASF gave assurances regarding State’s objections—that the airlift was confined to Kenyan students, that the project should have been done through IIE, that there was inadequate provision for the students’ expenses in the United States—the department signed off on the request. Of course, that such conditions never had been spelled out and thus never could have been met remained difficult for State to explain. Nor could State provide details on just where the \$100,000 was coming from, even as it assured Fulbright that the funds were “legally available.” Fulbright acidly chastised State for being susceptible to outside pressures—especially, he added, when trying to spend public money in lieu of private money.⁵¹

Framing an Appeal: “We Can Do Better”

Using the holy grail of votes, black leaders were able to move both the private and public realms to act on their objectives and get the African students to America. And in black America, the not-so-silent witnesses to this drama found themselves enjoying the sight of presidential candidates jockeying for their support. “One of Nixon’s henchmen showed

⁴⁹ Statement by Sen. Hugh Scott, *Congressional Record*, 86 Cong., 2 sess., Aug. 17, 1960, pp. 16629–30.

⁵⁰ Statement by Sen. John F. Kennedy, *ibid.*, 16630–31.

⁵¹ Remarks by Sen. J. William Fulbright, *ibid.*, 16632; Fulbright to Herter, Aug. 18, 1960, box 649, series 320, Nixon Pre-Presidential Papers; Macomber to Fulbright, Aug. 22, 1960, box 1044, Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers; “Facts on Grant to African Airlift Students—Summary.”

State the deep point that the Kennedy gift would be worth a lot of Negro votes, which it would be best for Nixon to have in a tight contest,” chuckled the *Pittsburgh Courier*, “so all of a sudden State recalled that it had been for the project from the beginning!” The *Courier* took the high road, arguing that the important fact was that the students made it to America, not who paid their way, a sentiment the *Chicago Defender* echoed: “Here is a good opportunity for Americans of good will, regardless of color, to help Africans enhance their educational status, cope with poverty and serve their communities, their country, and the world more effectively.” Yet Kennedy and Nixon knew that it did make a difference who was seen supporting Africa, as Emmett Marshall, a reader of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, reminded them. Asserting that more than 200 million Africans could profit from an American education, that Nixon would do well to triple the amount Kennedy produced, and that the State Department should dig deep for \$8–10 million for the cause, Marshall argued that the reason Senator Scott was “greatly alarmed” over the Kennedy aid came down to one thing: race. “I would love to know if Senator Kennedy is just a little more color blind than Senator Scott. Is that what disturbs the Senator?”⁵²

Kennedy, whose campaign worked with and advertised in the black press much more than Nixon’s, knew that word of his support for Africa would inevitably find its way into the news, and he hoped, as Robinson and other black leaders argued, that it would create a political payoff with black voters such as Emmett Marshall. Nixon just as clearly feared that scenario, hence the frantic efforts to maneuver credit for supporting the airlift away from the Kennedy Foundation and to the State Department. When the efforts failed, the Nixon campaign tried to raise doubts about the integrity of Kennedy’s involvement in order to undercut the way the episode was playing out in the black community. After working to that end on the floor of the Senate, Scott tried a venue far from his normal channels: the pages of the black press. His interest in the project, Scott wrote to the *New York Amsterdam News*, had begun months previously when he was having dinner with Jackie Robinson, and his recent statements were meant, not to devalue the airlift, but to question Kennedy’s political maneuvering. Fully supportive of the opportunity for these Africans, Scott wanted to assure all that “[my] interest in helping to bring students here from Africa will continue, as will my efforts in connection with civil rights legislation.”⁵³

The intertwining of the two—Africa and the civil rights agenda—revealed a profound reality of the day: Black men and women in America believed someone’s commitment to black freedom and progress in Africa reflected his or her commitment to racial progress in America. Accusations that Kennedy forces pressured the AASF and “outbid” the State Department make sense given the importance of Africa to black America in the summer of 1960. As the wave of independence that seemed to sweep from one African country to another turned 1960 into “The Year of Africa,” stories, editorials, and letters about an emerging black Africa filled the pages of the black press. Africa and civil rights dominated the hard news coverage, and the issues were linked. “We dark-skinned Americans are understandably emotional in our attitudes toward the black nations of Africa—past, present, and future,” remarked Lester Granger of the Urban League. “Colonialism, whether

⁵² “The African Student Hassle,” editorial, *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sept. 3, 1960, p. 12; “Here’s Where You Can Help,” editorial, *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 18, 1960, p. 12; Emmett Marshall to editor, *Baltimore Afro-American*, Sept. 10, 1960, p. 4.

⁵³ Hugh Scott to editor, *New York Amsterdam News*, Sept. 3, 1960, p. 10.

it be of the brutally exploitative or the suavely manipulative type, is abhorrent to us; we equate it with racial segregation in this country.”⁵⁴

A number of broad concerns were on African American minds when it came to Africa: the end of white minority rule and support for African independence; economic and development assistance; and a greater voice in formulating and implementing U.S. policy on Africa. African American leaders saw themselves as having a special role to play in the United States in regard to Africa, from working to end discriminatory treatment against the steadily increasing number of African diplomats coming to the United States to securing places for more black Americans as Foreign Service officers. “As Americans deeply committed to the United Nations and as citizens with more than ordinary interest in the democratic independence of the African nations,” NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins wrote to the UN secretary general, Dag Hammarskjöld, in early October, NAACP members and leaders were “greatly concerned” about the discrimination faced by Africans who journeyed to New York. Wilkins offered the NAACP’s services in helping address the situation, for “the reciprocal impact of their [Africans’] fight for independence and our fight for equality in this country, together with the many analogies arising therefrom, puts us in a unique position to be of assistance in the present case.”⁵⁵

Indeed, efforts were already underway to create an organization by, of, and for black Americans to influence policy toward Africa. Within two years, the major civil rights leaders would join in calling on the broad spectrum of black Americans to form an organization to lobby in behalf of African causes and interests. “The American Negro community in the U.S. has a special responsibility to urge a dynamic policy on our own country,” wrote Martin Luther King, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality, Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women, and Whitney Young of the Urban League. “Although we have a serious civil rights problem which exhausts much of our energy, we cannot separate the struggle at home from that abroad.”⁵⁶

The transnational links pointed to by black American leaders offered Democrats an opportunity to invoke Africa in an oblique play for the black vote without even further loosening their increasingly precarious hold on white southern voters. Kennedy in particular pursued the connection: during the final three months of the campaign he referred to Africa an eye-opening 167 times in his speeches and statements. In contrast, Nixon did so 23 times. The stark contrast was paralleled, albeit less frequently, when the topic was Asia: Kennedy raised it 82 times; Nixon did so 15 times. Vietnam was not yet an issue, and Asia did not speak to black voters as did Africa. While the lack of detailed opinion polling makes it impossible to gauge why individual African Americans cast their ballots as they did, we can see what Kennedy perceived and emphasized.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Lester Granger, “Manhattan and Beyond,” *ibid.*, Sept. 17, 1960, p. 10.

⁵⁵ Roy Wilkins to Dag Hammarskjöld, Oct. 7, 1960, box 326, series A, General Office File, 1956–1965, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress). On the problems raised by discrimination against African diplomats, see Renee Romano, “No Diplomatic Immunity: African Diplomats, the State Department, and Civil Rights, 1961–1964,” *Journal of American History*, 87 (Sept. 2000), 546–79.

⁵⁶ Call letter for the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa, [Aug. 1962], box 2, series 1, part 2, Records of the National Urban League.

⁵⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, *Freedom of Communications*, part I: *The Speeches, Remarks, Press Conferences, and Statements of Senator John F. Kennedy, August 1 through November 7, 1960*, 87 Cong., 1 sess., pp. 1291–93, 1299; *ibid.*, part II: *The Speeches, Remarks, Press Conferences, and Study Papers of Vice President Richard M. Nixon, August 1 through November 7, 1960*, pp. 1263, 1266–67. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. reported 479 refer-

Kennedy used Africa deftly. In August, as the United Negro College Fund announced that it was sending top officials to Africa to explore expanding its scholarship programs to Africans, Kennedy announced that he was sending Averell Harriman on a fact-finding mission to Africa. Kennedy advertisements in the black press highlighted his interest in Africa. As his ad copy in the *Pittsburgh Courier* reached back to claim Franklin Roosevelt's mantle, it looked ahead to the need in this global Cold War "to move democracy forward—to a new day for citizens at home and our friends overseas in the rising nations of Africa and Asia." Other advertisements told readers that Kennedy "will dedicate himself to the Democratic 'Rights of Man' Platform—in America and throughout the world." When large advertisements in the black press touted his record on a variety of topics, one international topic was highlighted: Africa.⁵⁸

Kennedy also picked up on the lack of African American representation in the U.S. diplomatic corps. This long-standing inequity had become even more glaring as African nations gained independence and the United States named white ambassadors as envoys. "Do you know how many Negroes we have in our State Department Foreign Service out of 6,000? Twenty-six. Do you know how many Federal judges there are, Federal district judges? Zero out of 220. We can do better. We can do better," Kennedy exhorted a packed crowd at the Elks Auditorium in Los Angeles. Addressing a largely black audience in Oakland the next day, telling his listeners that Africa was the "most important new continent in the world," he repeated the intertwined examples, concluding, "I don't say that everyone has the same talent, but I think that everyone should have the same chance to develop that talent." In Oakland, in the United States, in Africa, the lines blended for his listeners.⁵⁹

Kennedy adeptly framed his African themes and examples in order to champion domestic black concerns in a foreign Cold War context. Speaking in Los Angeles about the ability of the United States to survive in a difficult and dangerous world, Kennedy asked, "If the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communists bring thousands more students from Africa and Asia to study in Moscow and Peiping than we do in this country, when we can't even afford to bring over 300 Africans to study in our country this summer, then can we say truthfully that that is important only to us?" From there Kennedy segued into his next point, the "issue of religious and racial freedom here in the United States," asking his audience how the country could look for "the friendship of Negroes and colored people around the globe" when in this country "Negroes and others are denied their full constitutional rights."⁶⁰

And so it went, with Kennedy repeatedly referring to Africa, usually in the context of America's global leadership, yet with the subtext linking it to civil rights and black voters in America. Perhaps the most pronounced connections came on October 12, when Kennedy bookended the National Conference on Constitutional Rights—which brought

ences to Africa by Kennedy in his 1960 campaign speeches; the figure may come from the entire campaign, but more likely from duplicate citations. See Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), 554.

⁵⁸ "Make Study on Scholarships for Africans," *New York Amsterdam News*, Sept. 13, 1960, p. 2; "Kennedy for President" advertisements, *Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 1, 1960, p. 5; *ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1960, p. 4; *ibid.*, Oct. 29, 1960, sec. 2, pp. 4–5.

⁵⁹ "Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Elks Auditorium, Los Angeles, Calif., November 1, 1960," in Committee on Commerce, *Freedom of Communications*, part I, 846; "Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Defremery Park, Oakland, Calif., November 2, 1960," *ibid.*, 861.

⁶⁰ "Speech of Senator John F. Kennedy, Shrine Auditorium, Los Angeles, Calif., September 9, 1960," *ibid.*, 191.

together Democratic leaders such as Hubert Humphrey and Eleanor Roosevelt and civil rights leaders in an effort to create a blueprint for moving forward on civil rights—with a major speech on Africa and a rally at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem. Starting the day before the National Council of Women, he spoke sympathetically and at length about the needs and desires of African peoples, outlining six primary actions to take. From his first point (“to meet the need for education we must greatly increase the number of African students—future African leaders—brought to this country for university training”) to his last (“we must wipe out all traces of discrimination and prejudice against Negroes at home, if we are to win the respect and friendship of the Negro peoples of Africa”), his speech emphasized Africa while also speaking to black America.⁶¹

Kennedy dramatically reinforced this intertwining at his final event of the day, when he addressed large crowds in Harlem. Civil rights, Kennedy told his audience, are important “not only to ourselves but all those who look to us in the cause of freedom. When an African diplomat cannot get a house in Washington, it isn’t because he is African. It is because his own people, the Afro-Americans in this country, cannot get good housing.” Linking civil rights, economic discrimination, Africans, and African Americans, Kennedy added Cold War concerns as well, lamenting that in the recent UN vote on the status of Communist China, only two African nations voted with the United States, Liberia and South Africa. Kennedy appealed to his audience: “What is wrong? I believe it is important that the President of the United States personify the ideals of our society, speak out on this, associate ourselves with the great fight for equality.”⁶²

For his listeners, that fight was at home *and* in Africa, and so Kennedy linked the two. Drawing on an array of dismal statistics—“if a Negro baby is born here and a white baby is born next door, that Negro baby’s chance of finishing high school is about 60 percent of the white baby. This baby’s chance of getting through college is about a third of that baby’s”—Kennedy drummed home the comparison he had now used so often, reminding his audience that only two dozen of the 6,000 members of the Foreign Service were of African descent. “That is not very many, when Africa will poll one-fourth of all votes in the General Assembly by 1962. One-fourth of all the votes of the General Assembly by 1962 will be African. Again, he [the representative of an African nation] will have the same vote as the United States in the General Assembly. We want them to join us in moving forward. We want to move forward ourselves. We want to build a stronger America.”⁶³ Standing in Harlem, Kennedy deftly intertwined the themes on which he appealed to black America as he campaigned under the banner of a Democratic party riven by the issue of civil rights. Kennedy walked a politically tricky path, and thus he chose to use Africa—so much that during the campaign he talked about Africa more than twice as often as he did about civil rights. Kennedy may not have understood the links between black Americans and Africa better than Nixon did, but his words and actions on behalf of African nationalism, education, and the equal treatment of Africans offered black voters evidence that he did. That has been lost in the singular focus on the King phone calls.

⁶¹ “Speech by John F. Kennedy, National Council of Women, Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York, N.Y., October 12, 1960,” *ibid.*, 567–71, esp. 569–70.

⁶² “Excerpts of Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Public Rally, Hotel Theresa, New York, N.Y., October 12, 1960,” *ibid.*, 580–83, esp. 582.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 582–83.

In the Wake of the Campaign

Over the years the enduring drama of the King phone calls has continued to define them as the key issue for black voters and hence pivotal to Kennedy's razor-thin victory. Yet one wonders what would have happened if King had not been jailed. The story of the phone calls has obscured other, deeper efforts by the 1960 presidential candidates, particularly Kennedy, to appeal to black voters while not pushing away southern white voters. For Kennedy to rehabilitate his civil rights record without alienating the segregationist South required a daunting balancing act, making his use of Africa and of the burgeoning African-American relationship so vital.

Indeed, Kennedy's campaign emphasis was Africa before civil rights, an emphasis that also reveals his truer interests. In broadening our understanding of the various appeals Kennedy employed, we rediscover that black voters had many issues on which to judge the candidates, that they made their judgments over a long time, and even that the phone calls probably caused no last-minute "massive shift" in voting that tipped the scales in Kennedy's favor—the root of much of the drama of the calls. Certainly the 30 percent swing on which Taylor Branch builds his case for the import of the King phone calls did not occur.⁶⁴ Kennedy used a variety of means, from bread-and-butter measures to outreach to Africa, to assuage the doubts of black elites about his poor civil rights record and to clear the way for black voters to embrace him. When the major black newspapers made their endorsements before the election, the pro-Kennedy sentiment was firmly entrenched while references to the King calls were conspicuously absent. Only one, the *Chicago Defender*, cited the King phone calls as a reason to support Kennedy.⁶⁵

As the campaigns traversed the shifting social and political landscape of an America changing in response to the force of the civil rights movement, both Kennedy and Nixon sought ways to appeal to black voters without alienating southern white voters. The global dimensions of the Cold War and the reinvigorated connections between African Americans and Africa offered an opportunity to the candidates. Black Americans wanted support for independent Africa, and black leaders sought to use the prize of black votes in a tight contest to push the candidates to support an African agenda. Kennedy in particular responded, blending themes of ending racial discrimination in the United States as a way to boost America's prestige among newly independent nations with even more pronounced efforts to cast himself as a friend of Africa to court voters who saw little to love in his civil rights record. In responding to black leaders and strengthening his African appeal, Kennedy took advantage of political openings, yet his words and deeds fit his vision of a broadened American outreach to the nations of the world. Kennedy welcomed

⁶⁴ Immediately after the election, analysts who talked of a "great shift" in black voting used downright wrong figures, as did Thruston Morton in lamenting that Nixon polled only 10–12% of the black vote, or used the rhetoric while describing hardly massive gains by Kennedy of roughly 10%, as did the oft-cited pollster Richard Scammon. Kennedy, with roughly 68% of the black vote, outdid Adlai Stevenson's 61% in 1956, yet fell short of Stevenson's 79% in 1952. "What the Two Campaign Managers Said," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov. 19, 1960, p. 6; Wilson, "Negro in American Politics," 439; Richard Scammon, "How the Negroes Voted," *New Republic*, Nov. 21, 1960, pp. 8–9. Taylor Branch cited an article in the *Crisis* for a "30 percent shift," yet that article states, "The Gallup report indicated that Senator Kennedy gained seven percentage points among Negroes in comparison with those of 1956." See Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 374; and Gloster Current, "Why Nixon Lost the Negro Vote," *Crisis*, 68 (Jan. 1961), 5.

⁶⁵ "Where We Stand," editorial, *New York Amsterdam News*, Oct. 29, 1960, p. 1; "It's Kennedy: AFRO's Choice for President," editorial, *Baltimore Afro-American*, Nov. 5, 1960, p. 1; Roger Didier, "A New Leadership for New Horizons," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov. 5, 1960, p. 3; "To-Morrow—Day of Decision," editorial, *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 7, 1960, p. 14.

Mboya to Hyannis Port and supported opportunities for African students; in contrast, doors in Washington remained closed, even though Mboya had spent more time with and corresponded more frequently with the vice president—the administration’s man “obsessed” with Africa.⁶⁶

The effort to give African issues a central place left a sizable imprint in both the United States and Africa. The plight of the airlift students brought the issue of African education and, more broadly, the struggles of Africans for a better life literally into Kennedy’s home. Reinforcing his support for still inchoate ideas such as those that led to the Peace Corps, the engagement with Africa during the campaign pushed him to consider anew the possibilities of working with the emerging Third World. Not coincidentally, during his first two years in the White House, Kennedy met with more than twenty African leaders and regularly asked for, and received, updates on issues such as the fate of the African students and educational exchanges.⁶⁷ The fleeting call to Coretta Scott King indicates none of this; for Kennedy Africa was a more engaging interest, and at the time that made a difference. As historians seek to give more transnational breadth to their work, it is worth remembering that voters fifty years ago had such transnational perspectives—and that in the election of 1960 Kennedy needed more than two phone calls to gain the support of black voters.

⁶⁶ Mboya to Nixon, July 28, 1960, box 487, series 320, Nixon Pre-Presidential Papers; Nixon to Mboya, Aug. 22, 1960, *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 558.