

BRENDA GAYLE PLUMMER, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956 – 1974* (New York, NY: Cambridge UP, 2013), 372pp.

In this historical study of the overlapping but often presumed separate African American Civil Rights period and the Era of Decolonization, Plummer shows that these pivotal movements were related and that black leaders saw the future of African Americans tied to Africans in the future decolonized world. *In Search of Power* is a needed reminder to scholars and students focusing on this period and the aftermath that while we rightly examine the parallel struggles of blacks in America and those in Africa and the colonized Americas, the struggles were not identical and the failed expectations for African American rights in the United States can be better understood by looking at the relationship of these two struggles. Plummer's study is a comprehensive one: the book is organized into nine chapters that are encased by introductory and concluding chapters that build the framework for the body of the book and offer a coda that reflects on the implications of the findings in this scholarship. The author methodically outlines the book's aim to investigate how and why the anticipated changes for African Americans during the almost twenty year Decolonization Era, 1956 – 1974, went ultimately unrealized. Plummer's study is grounded in careful research, evident in the vast primary and secondary sources from which she draws. This includes black newspapers and magazines from the era under study, government archives, private communications, and she also addresses the works of contemporary historians, sociologists, and political scientists to offer a highly critical look at this age.

Plummer cogently captures the milieu of her study's beginning, particularly weaving a history that shows how academia, intellectualism, literature, politics, and economics of the late 1950s reflect "A Great Restlessness" as she entitles chapter one. Here she explains the historical setting that gave rise to leaders and institutions such as Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, and to reactions such as black expatriation. She then shows how these dynamics converged to influence black American interests in the affairs of continental Africans and Africans across the globe. Plummer's insightful summation of Henry Kissinger's assessment of the nation's problem with racial

discrimination underscores her reading of the eventual failure to realize the 60s aspirations for racial equity. Plummer cites Kissinger's 1957 response to Urban League director Lester Granger regarding his policy paper on the race problem. Kissinger wrote to Granger that his paper suggested "the manner and method of presenting our case rather than to the substance of the issue itself, which in the long run is the only sure way of improving attitudes abroad." Plummer explains that "The White House and the State Department thereafter followed this advice. They did not have to solve the U.S. racial problem; they only had to manage the way the world perceived it. The permanence of racism was implied" (63).

*In Search of Power* details the complex policies of presidents during this era, illustrating how no matter the administration and its followings, policies and concerns for African American interests as well as blacks internationally were not at the forefront of national aims. She reminds us that despite President John Kennedy's romanticized legacy as defender of civil rights, he "was never fully attuned to either Africa or African Americans" (99). She points out, for example, that "[b]lack New York politicians Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and J. Raymond Jones had pressured Kennedy to attend to urban affairs in exchange for their support" (104). Plummer also captures the complex aims of African American leaders and organizations that led to diverse visions of African American ties to and interest in continental Africa and blacks in the Atlantic world. Levels and notions of shared struggles were informed by such matters as black interests in U.S. assimilation, concepts of identity as national or international, and concepts about coalition strategies. Often the perception was that rights for one black group had to be traded or sacrificed for another—on both a national and an international stage. Most problematic for Pan-Africanists was the matter of postcolonial African nations that erupted into bloody political confrontations within. How could the struggle be imagined when race was not the outward marker or source of the strife? And as Plummer points out through the examples of Kennedy and Johnson policies in countries such as the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, South Africa, and Algeria, black interference that strayed from official U.S. policy was unwelcomed and quickly quelled.

The Johnson presidency marked the signing of the historic 1964 Civil Rights Act and

the 1965 Voting Rights Act; however, African Americans remained stifled by poverty, substandard housing, and limited economic opportunities, and despite the shift from the South's Jim Crow label to the newly tagged Sun Belt brand, life for black southerners remained a struggle. With rising numbers of blacks in the military and increased black interest in U.S. international policies with brown and black nations, Johnson's relationship with them grew more strained, despite his signature on these historic pieces of legislation. As Plummer explains, Johnson's handling of race matters and leaders left him little if any political gain: while he distrusted King, the president thought that Roy Wilkins identified too closely with the White House. Wilkins's loss of African Americans' trust would thus diminish his value to Johnson. It was a curious situation: "Johnson could not benefit from either his black friends or his black enemies" (189).

It is chapter five that marks Plummer's study as clearly true to the book's subtitle "African Americans in the era of Decolonization." The previous chapters seem more a history of state department or presidential race policies that affected the course of black civil rights and black international campaigns for racial equality. From chapter six forward, Plummer draws a history of the period through the prism of black activism that was spawned through both formal and grass roots leadership. She traces well the import of black literary figures during this period, illustrating how well-known figures such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Amiri Baraka, and Maya Angelou were shaped by but also helped shape the black liberation movement at home and abroad. Plummer maps out the complex and diverse cross-continental alliances, coalitions, and conflicts that developed out of African American activism during the era under study. This includes coverage of black organizations such as SCLC, SNCC, OAU, NAACP, and the Black Panther Party as well as key organization figures ranging from the more conservative Martin Luther King, Jr., Adam Clayton Powell, and Roy Wilkins to more radical figures such as Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and Bobby Seale.

*In Search of Power* follows the achievements and the triumphs of civil rights activism but shows how ultimately key shortfalls at sometimes key moments among organizational leadership, coupled by a government that was unwavering in its indifference to equal opportunity, paved the way for the unfulfilled aims of this movement. Plummer poignantly traces how the Cold War and American corporate interests at home and abroad also shaped policies that undermined promises of racial equality in the United States and autonomy for continental Africans and blacks in the Caribbean. She offers a look at the muddled influence of communism in civil rights activism, showing the U.S. government's manipulation of the very term to raise fears about black leaders and organizations and to then sanction actions against them. She reminds readers also that academia played a role as well in disseminating information that played to conventional white racism: "predominately white universities, many of them effectively segregated, profited from Cold War driven payouts from foundations and the government as social scientists prognosticated on the requisites for Third World growth and prosperity" (225) Her account of the transformation of the South from Jim Crow to Sunbelt reveals the economic and corporate liaisons that paved the way for companies in search of lower operating costs and higher revenues. With a Nixon presidency that deemed the source of the race problem simply a matter of blacks themselves, black protest was further painted and handled as criminalized behavior (cf. 250). The added mix of poverty and drugs that was prevalent in numerous African American communities provided an ideal platform from which to reign in the more threatening black activists.

The era ends, as Plummer explains, with civil rights legislation in America and overtures to emerging nations in Africa and the Caribbean. With U.S. policies and actions as well as failed or short-sighted efforts by black leaders, however, the struggle for power and opportunity sought in this era of activism has fallen short of the mark.

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