



# **Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy's Courting of African Nationalist Leaders**

*Philip E. Muehlenbeck*

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As a presidential candidate, John F. Kennedy established a reputation across Africa as a sympathetic supporter of African nationalism, who if elected would realign Washington's priorities toward the continent. Once in office, Kennedy indeed made changing the image of America in Africa a top priority of his administration, believing that the Cold War could be won or lost depending upon whether Washington or Moscow won the hearts and minds of the Third World.

Africa was particularly important because a wave of independence saw nineteen newly independent African states admitted into the United Nations during 1960-61. By 1962, 31 of the UN's 110 member states were from the African continent, and both Washington and Moscow sought to add these countries to their respective voting bloc. Kennedy feared that neglect of the newly decolonized countries of the world would result in the rise of anti-Americanism and needed to be addressed irrespective of the Cold War. Philip Muehlenbeck demonstrates how Kennedy used all means at his disposal-economic, cultural, personal-to appeal to the leaders of the developing world, including Nkrumah, Senghor, Touré, Nyerere, and Ben Bella.

Drawing on archival sources from Africa, the United States, and the United Kingdom, Muehlenbeck closely examines Kennedy's policies towards Guinea, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Egypt, Algeria, Tanganyika, and South Africa, which were to a large extent successful in winning the sympathies of its peoples, while at the same time alienating more traditional American allies. *Betting on the Africans* adds an important chapter to the historiography of John F. Kennedy's Cold War strategy as well as the history of decolonization.

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