

The Unwelcome Mat

African Diplomats in
Washington, D.C., during
the Kennedy Years

Anyone who picked up a copy of the late 1960 edition of *Trends in Housing*, published by the National Committee against Discrimination in Housing (NCDH), would have been surprised to learn that many African diplomats characterized Washington, D.C., as a "hardship post." A front-page story suggested that America's housing problem extended into the international arena, noting, "African Diplomats Hit Race Barriers; Housing Problem Acute." The report that followed recounted a litany of complaints from African diplomats in Washington who faced constant discrimination and, in particular, problems in securing decent and affordable housing. The same publication boasted another front-page story that linked race and housing. A banner headline announced "Kennedy Committed to End Govt. Housing Bias; Executive Order Anticipated." The president-elect had pledged to abolish discrimination in federal housing "by a stroke of a pen." NCDH chairman of the board Algeron D. Black happily anticipated "a new frontier in housing."¹

Neither the seriousness of the situation concerning African diplomats in Washington nor the relationship between that situation and the larger issues of domestic racial discrimination and housing problems was lost on the new Kennedy administration. According to historian Thomas Noer, Kennedy viewed Africa as "an arena of significant Cold War rivalry." In addition, African nations were coming to play a much more significant role in the United Nations. In 1945 there were only four African countries in the UN; five more joined during the 1950s. Between 1960 and the end of 1963, however, twenty-four new African nations became members of the UN; fifteen of those had joined in 1960, just a year before Kennedy came into office.²

Instances of racial discrimination against African diplomats in Washington would hardly win the United States allies or UN votes. At home, Kennedy had vigorously courted the black vote in the 1960 election, an election that he won by the narrowest of margins. Part of his success in securing the black vote was due to promises such as that dealing with discrimination in housing.³

Embarrassing and very public incidents involving African diplomats being denied housing in the nation's capital could only accentuate Kennedy's inability to keep to his campaign promise. Frederick G. Dutton, one of the new president's special assistants, urged Press Secretary Pierre Salinger to consider the implications of "preventing discrimination against African and Asian visitors." Such prevention was "but a part, though an important part, of the Administration's concern for civil rights." African and Asian nations were "judging American society [not] so much on the basis of what may happen individually to one of their diplomats as how much respect is really shown in this country for the American doctrine of human equality and equal protection of the laws." As such, instances of racial discrimination against African and Asian diplomats were extremely significant, for "they lie astride exactly where U.S. foreign problems and domestic circumstances converge."⁴

A closer examination of discrimination against African diplomats in Washington, D.C., during the early 1960s reveals that such a "convergence" was really made up of a number of important conflicts: the conflict between America's pronouncements of its commitment to civil rights and equality and the reality of its highly segregated society; the conflict between the African American and official U.S. viewpoints concerning the relationship between the domestic race situation and the nation's diplomacy; and, overarching all of this, the conflict resulting from America's attempt to fight a two-front war—against racism at home and communism abroad.

At first glance, the issue of African diplomats in Washington seemed to be one on which both African Americans and U.S. foreign policy officials could agree. That would certainly mark a distinct break with the general pattern of the post-World War II years in which the African American viewpoint on U.S. foreign relations was generally dismissed, suppressed, or ignored by the Department of State. Yet, on this occasion at least, there was widespread agreement that the discrimination faced by the African diplomats in the nation's capital was resulting in a foreign policy disaster for the United States.

It was hardly surprising that African Americans were so harshly critical of the situation in Washington. In the years since World War II the civil rights movement had taken on a life of its own, propelled by leaders such as A. Philip Randolph, W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter White, and Martin Luther King Jr. In addition, the African American community began to take an increased interest in U.S. foreign relations, particularly the interconnections between their own struggle for civil rights at home and the colonial battles for freedom being waged in Africa and Asia. The black-white conflict, they argued, was at least as significant as the East-West contest. Their concern with African issues, in particular, was quite high.⁵

In addition to their interest in foreign affairs, African Americans had a long and hard experience in American discrimination and segregation. No doubt, some remembered an event that took place when the Truman administration tried to recruit Ralph Bunche as an assistant secretary of state. Bunche demurred, angrily announcing in an interview with the *Pittsburgh Courier* that he would not subject his children to the Jim Crow atmosphere of Washington.⁶

Now, in 1960, African diplomats were getting a firsthand view of what Bunche was talking about. In May the United States had to apologize to Ghana's Assistant Commissioner of Labor William E. Annan, who was turned away from a boardinghouse in Washington because it "had a policy of not accepting Negro guests." An article in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* claimed that African diplomats viewed Washington as a "hardship post," partly because of the expense of living there, but mainly because of the "racial barriers which still exist here. . . . Dark-skinned representatives, from ambassadors on down, have trouble finding decent homes in respectable neighborhoods—and even finding embassy sites." A State Department official opined that the Africans, many of whom had lived for long periods in Europe, were "'shocked' by their contact with prejudice here. 'America is underdeveloped in some ways too.'"⁷

The late 1960 *Trends in Housing* article recounted a list of horror stories from African diplomats seeking homes in Washington. One official had to "camp on the top floor of his chancery for three years because he was unable to obtain adequate housing." Another had found a home, but "anonymous phone calls, many of them threatening violence," finally drove him from his "'white' neighborhood." Those who were fortunate enough to secure housing usually paid "premiums up to 50 per cent above what their white counterparts pay." The situation would only get worse, as it was expected that more than 200 African diplomats from twenty nations would be arriving in Washington within a year. Words of regret from the Department of State would no longer suffice. As one African diplomat observed, "We have a big file of apologies from the State Department. . . . What good does it do us?" The damage done to the prestige and reputation of the United States was incalculable for, as another African official put it, "Racism as it is practiced in the United States . . . touches us at our rawest spot."⁸

The trenchant commentary from various African American quarters continued as the Kennedy team took office in 1961. An editorial from the *Pittsburgh Courier* bluntly concluded, "America 'Aint [sic] Ready.'" The string of complaints from African diplomats "poses the question whether Americans are quite ready for the role of world leadership in a world predominantly col-

ored." That these officials had to suffer such indignities as "being passed up by taxis drivers, being seated in remote and obscure parts of dining rooms, being gypped on real estate rentals and sales, and being rudely treated by service employees" was "intolerable," and was "more eloquent than pious protestations by U.S. officials that such conduct is exceptional." The *Crisis*, official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, noted the continuing insults to African dignitaries. What these officials learned was that America's "'democratic freedoms' do not apply to persons with dark skins. As a world power and the leader of the 'Free World' we can no longer afford the luxury of jim-crow, segregation, and second-class citizenship." America must grasp the international implications of its "'Negro problem,'" since "The world looks to see if our democratic preachments are also our practices."⁹

It was stunning to many African Americans, therefore, that discriminatory acts toward African diplomats continued unabated. The *New York Amsterdam News* ran a front-page story about a Nigerian representative who was refused service at two restaurants and hotels in Maryland and an unidentified African ambassador who was turned away from a Maryland restaurant. The latter had requested that the episode be kept out of the press and "expressed his sorrow for the U.S." And in Washington, the housing problem remained unresolved. A story in the *Courier* revealed that less than half of the seventy-five African diplomats and their families had been able to "secure suitable housing." This was not surprising, since "only eight of 211 luxury apartments in the Northwest Washington area were accepting African diplomats as tenants."¹⁰

The African American press was unanimous in its opinion that the incidents of racial bias suffered by African diplomats were wreaking havoc on America's foreign policy. Perhaps because of its proximity to the scene of so many of these incidents, the *Baltimore Afro-American* was particularly keen on making this point. A series of articles from 1961 publicized the "headache" the episodes posed for the Department of State and the fact that the "snubs" suffered by African diplomats in Maryland were "wrecking U.S. foreign policy." An article that appeared in May, entitled "Race Issue International 'Time-Bomb,'" tried to put the domestic incidents into a global framework. America, it claimed, was "sorely handicapped in its life-death struggle with the Sino-Soviet bloc by incidents of racial discrimination." In such an atmosphere, acts of discrimination against African diplomats in the United States did "untold damage." On the same page was an article discussing a recent proposal by Representative Adam Clayton Powell "making it a federal offense to insult foreign diplomats."¹¹

While African Americans were often the first to comment on the situation affecting African diplomats in the United States, the incoming Kennedy administration quickly realized the seriousness of the incidents in Washington and elsewhere. Two reports to Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs G. Mennen Williams dealt with specific acts of discrimination against African (and Asian and Caribbean) diplomats. A West African diplomat had been "insulted in the most foul and abusive language" at a drive-in restaurant near Washington; another had driven with his family hundreds of miles through a number of different states without stopping: "they were unable to find accommodations, food, or a rest room during the entire trip." One African ambassador felt "a little bit like a hunted criminal" as a result of racist humiliations he and his compatriots suffered. The Malian and Cameroonian ambassadors viewed it as "impossible for them and their families to travel freely throughout the U.S." Both wished to tour the country and learn more about Americans, but "this was physically impossible so long as the possibility continued to exist of their being slighted and ignored and insulted in public places because they were Negroes."¹²

The Department of State's Office of Protocol in February 1961 prepared the most detailed study of the problems facing diplomats from nations of color in the Washington area. While the focus was on African diplomats, the report noted that representatives from Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America also presented "a special kind of problem." Twenty-eight new nations had just set up diplomatic missions in Washington or were about to do so. Twenty-two other mostly Asian and Middle Eastern nations had already set up embassies; Latin American nations accounted for another seventeen missions. Yet, it was not simply the sheer number of new missions that made for a "special problem"; it was the fact that "an act of discrimination against a diplomat from one of them" was taken as a "slight to all of them, since, as far as discrimination is concerned, they constitute a special group. Discrimination against a Togolese diplomat infuriates the Cameroonians as much as it does the Togolese."

While diplomats from the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America were mentioned in the report, the focus was very definitely on the African representatives in Washington. That city, the study continued, had made "great progress . . . in the field of Civil Rights," but there was no doubt that the nation's capital had "a long way to go before anything like social equality is accepted by all." Moreover, civil rights progress in neighboring Maryland and Virginia was much slower. In particular, African diplomats faced difficulties in finding appropriate housing; socializing in Washington; being served at various businesses such as restaurants and barber shops; and obtaining sat-

isfactory educational opportunities for their children. The housing situation was the “most embarrassing,” as well as the “most urgent problem.” The report estimated that “less than ten per cent of the landlords in the white areas in Washington are willing to lease living quarters to Negro diplomatic personnel of lesser rank than Ambassador.”

The report also explained that the impact of such discrimination extended far beyond the individual foreign representative. Because the “so-called ‘ruling classes’ of these new nations are closely knit groups,” any act that “affects one or more members of these groups is likely to have a strong influence on the opinions and attitudes of their governments.” Hence, “If the French Ambassador in Washington feels that he is being mistreated, this is not likely to affect United States–French relations in a radical way. But, if the Nigerian Ambassador in Washington is consistently mistreated, his reactions may influence the nature of United States–Nigerian relations to a considerable degree.”¹³

And as Kennedy administration officials were well aware, African nations were keeping a close eye on the civil rights situation in the United States and were alive to every instance of discrimination toward their diplomatic representatives. A Department of State report summarized some of the most recent press coverage in African newspapers. *L’Unité* (Cameroon) noted the “‘indignities’ suffered by African diplomats while searching for suitable lodgings in Washington” and added that “many African representatives in Washington remain unconvinced that racial incidents do not represent the true attitude of the American people.” The *Lagos Daily Times* (Nigeria) expressed its “horror and dismay” over the “continued practice of racial discrimination in a country supposed to uphold and practice the rule of law and the observance of fundamental human rights and which claims to champion the cause of the Western democracies based on Christian principles.” The Nigerian daily *West African Pilot*, commenting on a racial insult to a Nigerian diplomat, quoted one of the country’s major political parties as saying, “A country devoid of respect for human dignity, a country with a completely bankrupt racial policy, a country which still lives in the Dark Ages, has no claim to the leadership of free men.” The *Lagos Daily Mail* went even further, arguing that “U.S. policy for Africa might be laudable on paper, but a people suffering from the bite of the bug of Negrophobism cannot often impress us. It is to be seen how a nation of Ku Klux Klan officials can bring world peace. The qualities of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson are non-existent any more in America.”¹⁴

As Pedro Sanjuan of Protocol noted, these stories were but the tip of the iceberg. Referring specifically to another piece that had appeared in the *West African Pilot*, Sanjuan admitted, “There have been close to ninety major in-

idents involving African diplomats brought to our attention in the past two years. Through our efforts, almost all of them have been kept out of the pages of the newspapers. This article is based largely on those few incidents (seven) which could not be kept out. I think it illustrates the need to continue preventive measures that will insure in the future a similar degree of success."¹⁵

Whatever success these "preventive measures" might have had in keeping some stories out of the newspapers, it was apparent that Africans resented the discrimination their diplomatic representatives faced in the United States and that such resentments were hurting U.S. relations with Africa. A State Department study made clear the anger brewing among the African representatives. In general, they believed that they were residing in a country "where racial separation is an accepted practice and, therefore, where dark skinned diplomats are considered inferior to other diplomats." They put little faith in action by the U.S. government, because civil rights efforts were "not politically expedient." While admitting that the United States had made some progress, the African diplomats were "critical of what they consider to be the Government's policy of evading the issue." Apologies after the fact did not alleviate the resentment of the African officials, "primarily because they know that discrimination is not directed at them as representatives of certain foreign countries but as members of a race. They feel that this is an offense against their dignity as human beings." They became especially incensed when the United States attempted to "whitewash incidents," or when it was argued that "they should be treated differently than negro-Americans just for the sake of U.S. prestige in Africa."¹⁶

Acting Secretary of State Chester Bowles issued a press release in September 1961 decrying the recent spate of incidents in which African diplomats had been refused service in restaurants in the Washington area and stressing the harmful impact they had on U.S.-African relations. Episodes such as these were "not only morally wrong but have most unfortunate repercussions abroad." "We should not allow discriminatory practices to work to the detriment of our foreign policy," Bowles admonished. "It is the duty and the opportunity of every American to demonstrate to all foreign visitors that our democratic ideals 'are by no means hypocrisy.'"¹⁷

It was clear that African Americans and U.S. officials were nearly unanimous in their view that the discrimination against African diplomats in Washington and surrounding areas was damaging to the nation, both domestically and internationally. The calls for action—from African American newspapers, from civil rights groups, and from the Department of State—were therefore treated with some urgency. And so during the next few years the Kennedy administration looked for solutions to this "special problem." Some

were a bit bizarre, such as the suggestion from a member of State's Bureau of African Affairs that "a suitable unique type of pin or button to be worn" should be distributed to the African diplomats. The federal government would inform the states about "the insignia worn by diplomats and that the bearer of such insignia must be accorded every right and privilege accorded to any citizen of the U.S."¹⁸

Fortunately, nothing ever came of this idea to "tag" foreign diplomats. More rational and well-organized efforts centered on the housing situation in Washington and the numerous complaints of discrimination against African diplomats in restaurants along Route 40 in Maryland. Action to alleviate the housing problem for African diplomats actually began shortly before Kennedy took office. In August 1960, State's Chief of Protocol Wiley Buchanan wrote to the president of the Washington Real Estate Board asking for his organization's assistance. A short time later, officials from the Bureau of African Affairs met with representatives of the Real Estate Board, which gave its assurances that help would be forthcoming in finding African diplomats suitable housing. In November, State Department officials, representatives from the Real Estate Board, and the Washington, D.C., Board of Commissioners met to expand the effort and to discuss zoning changes in the district to facilitate the construction of chanceries for the new African nations.¹⁹

These efforts continued under the Kennedy administration. The Office of Protocol worked directly with the Real Estate Board and various large real-estate firms to find "suitable housing in Washington for African and other diplomats." Protocol would now keep lists of realtors willing to find housing for the diplomats and would inform the realtors when new African officials arrived in town. The office would also work closely with local organizations such as the Urban League Housing Group, the National Capital Clearing House for Neighborhood Democracy, and the African American Institute, as well as continue its contacts with the Board of Commissioners.²⁰

Problems along Route 40 were also addressed by the Kennedy administration. Restaurants along the highway had become constant targets of complaints from African diplomats (usually traveling between Washington and New York) who had been refused service. Once again, the Office of Protocol was at the forefront, meeting with the governor of Maryland, local newspaper editors, groups of Maryland citizens, and the restaurant owners. At the governor's request, the State Department had given its support to a public accommodations bill then pending in the Maryland Legislative Council. The program of "voluntary cooperation" resulted in thirty-five Maryland restaurant owners agreeing to desegregate their businesses.²¹

The convergence of domestic and international affairs had apparently re-

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John F. Kennedy passes civil rights protesters as he attends a 14 November 1963 ceremony to open the Northeast Expressway connecting New York and Washington, D.C. Incidents of discrimination against African diplomats along highways in the D.C. corridor led the State Department to put pressure on local governments. (Bettmann/Corbis)

sulted in a mutually satisfactory conclusion: some small progress had been made on the civil rights front, while international (particularly African) criticism of American society would be blunted. In many ways, however, these victories were illusory. The meeting between America's civil rights problem and Cold War diplomacy that took place around the issue of African diplomats in Washington revealed some significant conflicts that no amount of meetings, lists, or "voluntary cooperation" could overcome.

State's efforts to convince African diplomats (and the world) that America's statements concerning freedom, equality, and human rights were more than mere "hypocrisy," as Bowles had put it, inevitably ran into an insurmountable problem: America continued to be a highly segregated society. An August 1963 Harris poll provided an interesting insight into this conflict. It found that nearly 80 percent of white Americans believed that racial discrimination in their nation was hurting the country's image abroad. However, this view was "tempered rather sharply when white people talk about their own willingness to have greater contact with Negroes in their own personal lives." More than 50 percent of whites polled indicated that they would object to living next door to African Americans; nearly a third did not want their children going to school with black children. And one-fourth to one-fifth of those surveyed would not want to attend church with or work next to African Americans.²²

Thus, efforts by the Office of Protocol to explain to African diplomats that “remarkable changes are taking place in our country” and that acts of discrimination were merely “vestiges of a form of social stupidity which is rapidly disappearing from the scene” were undercut by the fact that the forces of segregation still exerted tremendous influence in America. The “successes” in terms of housing in Washington and problems along Route 40 were never as far-reaching as the State Department would have the African diplomats believe. The NCDH reported in early 1962 that, although Washington realtors had assured the State Department that “housing equity could be accomplished within two or three years through quiet, unpublicized efforts,” little had changed. In 1961 only 8 of 211 buildings in Northwest Washington would accept nonwhite tenants; a year later, only 9 of 214 buildings accepted African diplomats. One reason for this lack of success was suggested by the organization: “The Washington Board of Realtors has never admitted a Negro member.” By early 1963 even the Office of Protocol had to admit failure. The problem of finding rentals for African diplomats remained “almost insoluble,” with Protocol “powerless” to help. The office had received forty-two requests for assistance from African diplomats in the past year; in each case, the diplomats had “been insulted at some point in their search by a manager or owner who has told them that nonwhites are not permitted in this or that building.” The “effort to secure apartments resulted in failure.”²³

The Route 40 campaign was not entirely ineffectual, but still fell far short of its promises. The Maryland public accommodations law that the State Department pushed for in 1961 was not passed until nearly two years later. The Office of Protocol claimed that it was a “great step forward,” but then admitted that it was a “weak law.” It did refine a trespass law whereby individuals could be jailed for refusal to leave a public establishment after being asked. This could still occur but not “on the basis of a person’s color.” Still, the law would have effect only in “the more progressive counties of Maryland,” though it was hoped that it would have a “strong moral effect in bringing about the eventual inclusion of the counties which so far have exempted themselves from its jurisdiction.”²⁴

The issue of African diplomats in Washington also illuminated the conflict between the African American and official State Department viewpoints concerning America’s civil rights problem and international relations. For many African Americans race and civil rights were at the center of their thinking concerning the nation’s diplomacy, and for both domestic and international reasons they called for direct and decisive action to end segregation in America. Black Americans consistently pointed out the connections between racial segregation in the United States and the struggles for freedom in Africa.

Journalist Ethel Payne wrote in 1960 that “the events in Africa and particularly, the Congo crisis are making colored Americans more aware of international relations and the reciprocal effect upon their own struggle for full citizenship.” The American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa (ANLCA), formed in 1962 with a membership made up of many of the leading African Americans of the nation, echoed that theme, stating that “Negroes are of necessity deeply concerned with developments in Africa because of the moral issues involved and because the struggle here at home to achieve in our time equality without respect to race or color is made easier to the extent that equality and freedom are achieved everywhere.” According to one of the ANLCA members, Whitney Young, the “decision to link the integration struggle in the United States with the fate of the sub-Saharan African states would represent a new phase in the civil rights struggle.”²⁵

The situation with African diplomats in Washington provided one such “link.” African Americans were convinced that the discrimination against African officials was not only stark evidence of the segregation that they themselves faced each and every day, but also a decidedly negative factor in the nation’s diplomatic efforts in Africa. Efforts to put out a symbolic welcome mat for African diplomats would not suffice; only an aggressive civil rights stance by the federal government could meet the cries for reform at home and the criticisms from abroad. An editorial in the *Crisis* had more than a note of impatience when it stated, “While we commend the efforts of State Department officials and others to take steps to end the racial incidents involving African envoys, we must also remind these same officials that they must likewise take steps to free America of the racist attitudes which create incidents for her own colored citizens.” Journalist Louis Lautier was more pointed. The programs to help the African diplomats were “laudable” and “praiseworthy,” but even if they were successful “the dropping of such bars would hardly breach the walls of racial discrimination and segregation against all colored peoples in the nation’s capital—native or foreign-born.” Lautier then got to the core of his argument:

If the Kennedy administration would do something tangible about segregation and discrimination in housing and improve the image of the United States in the minds of Africans and dark-skinned peoples the world over, it should begin with colored Americans. Early in his Administration, President Kennedy promised to study the powers of the executive and determine whether he had the authority to issue an executive order banning racial segregation in federally assisted housing. Not a peep has been heard from him since he made this promise nearly six months ago.

A cartoon accompanying Lautier's editorial portrayed a well-dressed "African" dressing a black "American" in traditional African garb. "There!" the African announced. "Now you can get an apartment in your own country!"²⁶

Three reporters from the *Baltimore Afro-American* took things a bit farther to demonstrate the absurdity of the government's approach to the problems faced by African diplomats. Posing as African dignitaries from "Goban," the three made a 125-mile trip along Route 40, ending with dinner in a segregated restaurant in Baltimore. Two restaurants along the highway served them, while one turned them away, claiming, "They ain't no Africans." In Baltimore, they dined at one of the city's "most discriminating downtown restaurants."²⁷

The Department of State did not share the African American viewpoint on race, civil rights, and U.S. foreign policy. First and foremost, the department was decidedly uneasy with and ill equipped to handle issues of race and civil rights. In the years since World War II, State had been buffeted by criticisms of America's racial problems from both friend and foe abroad and by demands for action to help alleviate those problems from African Americans at home. Its responses had never been particularly effective. As to the international denunciations, the department took three main approaches: ignore them, decry them as communist-inspired propaganda, and/or create counterpropaganda that generally whitewashed the racial situation in America. To the African American criticisms that State was not showing proper attention to the issues of race and civil rights, the answer was consistent: token appointments of a handful of African Americans to well-publicized (but virtually powerless) foreign-policy-making positions.²⁸

Despite the fact that during the Kennedy administration Department of State figures such as Secretary Dean Rusk made a number of public pronouncements concerning the adverse impact of the civil rights problem on U.S. diplomacy (including Rusk's testimony before Congress in 1963 supporting a public transportation bill outlawing discrimination), the department's response to the incidents concerning African diplomats in Washington indicated that its basic approach to both foreign criticism and domestic demands concerning civil rights had not changed very much.²⁹

By 1961 the State Department could no longer ignore the civil rights issue when dealing with incidents of discrimination against African diplomats. Too many African nations were watching, and the civil rights movement at home was becoming too powerful. However, it could still rely on its other approaches to the issue: claiming that communist propaganda was "distorting" the civil rights problem in America, and attempting to counter that propaganda by putting a more favorable spin on events.

United States officials were well aware that communist propagandists were having a field day with each new incident involving an African diplomat. Assistant Secretary Williams, speaking to a gathering of states' representatives in 1961, charged that "one percent—that sounds like a small percentage but, nonetheless, it is large in all of the various items—one percent of all of the Communist propaganda is dedicated to this one failure on our part to handle our relationships with the individuals over here from foreign countries." The Soviet press claimed that the State Department was going to "organize 'a diplomatic ghetto' because it could not 'guarantee the security' of African diplomats." Another article speculated on a "need [for] a 'special quarter in Washington for African diplomats—somewhat in the manner of Indian reservations.'" Communist China also took advantage of the situation, and considered "these incidents as major propaganda windfalls which as 'a nation of color' can be utilized by the Red Chinese with particular effect in Africa and Asia."³⁰

With this as their starting point, U.S. officials moved on to suggest that the problems such as those surrounding African diplomats in America were largely ones of perceptions: the distorted perceptions being promulgated by America's enemies, and the desired perceptions that needed to be molded and guided through U.S. counterpropaganda. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Carl Rowan (one of the high-profile African American appointees in State) urged his listeners in a 1961 speech to put America's race problems "in perspective. We must show that the picture is not one of whites vs. Negroes, as our enemies would depict it, but of the vast majority of whites and Negroes striving together for progress." Chief of Protocol Angier Biddle Duke even went so far as to blame some of the African diplomats, who were "representatives of African governments which are desirous of creating incidents. These incidents can be used to distort social conditions in the United States and to cripple our diplomatic efforts to win the friendship of the African continent." In a truly astonishing piece of reasoning, Duke suggested that part of the problem was that the African diplomats really could not be expected to act with "forbearance" and "understanding" when "exposed to affronts." This was in contrast to African Americans who, "after years of experience, can develop the psychological maturity that affords some degree of immunity." These Americans "may adjust to these limitations of what should be the most cherished rights of any man any where. . . . They adjust because they know the laws of the land are in the process of being applied more and more equally." Duke's solution was to accentuate the positive: "help the African diplomats and their staffs in their everyday problems, and . . . present to them the brighter aspects of American life and, perhaps more im-

portantly, the majority will in the United States for change." (The Harris poll indicating that the "majority will" of the American people was somewhat less bright than Duke might wish was two years in the future.) And, in a tip of the hat to tokenism, he asked that "an intelligent and energetic Negro" be appointed to Protocol, one who could advise "as to the sources of the friction." Such an appointment would also "be an example in diplomatic circles generally of the earnest desire of this administration to use its human resources in an efficient and friendly manner."³¹

With such perceptions, it is small wonder that in contrast to the African American demand for forceful action on the civil rights front, State preferred quiet and voluntary efforts; indeed, aggressive action on the part of African Americans alarmed some officials. Pedro Sanjuan's suggestion that "preventive measures" needed to be increased in order to keep stories about incidents involving African diplomats out of the press was only part of the picture. Secretary Rusk, writing to Attorney General Robert Kennedy about these incidents, indicated that the United States faced a "far larger and more complex problem of relationships in a city which has a slight majority of negro citizens and the frictions arising therefrom." Yet Rusk also cautioned, "The matter is one which seems to me to require a compassionate regard for the origins of the difficulty and the deep-rooted feelings which surround it. It will require a considerable amount of quiet, patient and persistent effort if we are to achieve enduring results." He suggested that the administration "work unobtrusively" with local civic leaders to see that acts of racial discrimination were "reduced to the minimum." Citing his earlier interest with the "segregation problem" while serving with the Rockefeller Foundation, he observed that "the most constructive efforts were those which were made without fanfare and in a reasonable atmosphere not inflamed by violent public controversy."³²

Assistant Secretary Williams was equally "compassionate" when he addressed a gathering of states' representatives concerning the problem of African diplomats. He was "quite conscious that in many states we have a problem because in these states there is a public opinion which doesn't completely accept the idea of the equality of races for our own citizens." Happily, "these happen to be states which, I think in the history of our country, have demonstrated a kind of patriotism that has been the kind that all of the other states would seek to emulate, and here is a challenge to their patriotism of a special and perhaps unique kind." He hoped that "we would find some way of resolving this internal problem they have in order to meet a problem that touches us in a national way."³³

In assessing the success of the Route 40 campaign, Pedro Sanjuan cited the atmosphere of "voluntary cooperation" that led to "voluntary desegregation"

in some of the restaurants along the highway. The "Federal Government and the Maryland authorities" had arranged a "definite step forward." He noted in passing that the Congress of Racial Equality had threatened a "large protest all along that route" if the restaurant owners did not comply. Fortunately, the organization showed "sensible moderation . . . in accepting the partial fulfillment" of its demands.³⁴

In the early 1960s, America's "foreign problems" and "domestic circumstances" had converged around the issue of discrimination against African diplomats. Because most African Americans and State Department officials agreed that this particular problem was a direct result of those circumstances, it seemed obvious that forceful action on housing discrimination in Washington and in the area of public accommodations in Maryland would have both international and domestic benefits. By the time of Kennedy's assassination in 1963, however, little had changed in Washington and its surrounding areas concerning incidents involving African diplomats: efforts to secure housing in Washington had met near "total failure"; a "weak law" barring discrimination in Maryland restaurants had been passed. Many African Americans threw sarcastic jibes at the U.S. government's well-publicized (but mostly ineffectual) attempts to come to the aid of the African visitors, while real civil rights progress for the millions of America's black citizens languished.

At least partially, of course, this record of failure was due to the very strong forces of racial prejudice and segregation still at work in American society. Yet, it was also due to reluctance on the part of the Department of State (as well as other agencies and personnel of the Kennedy administration) to take a stronger stand on the issue of civil rights. Perhaps not surprisingly, officials at State perceived the civil rights problem through the lens of the Cold War. Through this perspective, international criticisms were often dismissed as communist propaganda or distorted misunderstandings; answers to such criticisms, therefore, did not involve consistent or forceful support for substantive change or reform, but merely the fine-tuning of perceptions; and the necessity for keeping a domestic Cold War coalition intact meant that watered-down appeals for "volunteerism" to recalcitrant southerners were combined with deep suspicions concerning any "violent public controversy" on the part of African Americans. The convergence of a Cold War mind-set and a civil rights ideology, therefore, resulted in few victories either at home or abroad.

Notes

1. *Trends in Housing* 4, 5 (Sept.–Oct. 1960): 1–2.
2. Thomas J. Noer, "New Frontiers and Old Priorities in Africa," in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961–1963*, ed. Thomas G. Paterson

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 256–58. For more on Kennedy's policies toward Africa, see Thomas J. Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation: The United States and White Rule in Africa, 1948–1968* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985); Richard D. Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Gerald E. Thomas, "The Black Revolt: The United States and Africa in the 1960s," in *The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade: American Foreign Relations in the 1960s*, ed. Diane B. Kunz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 320–60. Data on dates of entry of African nations into the United Nations is found on the UN web site <www.un.org/overview/unmember.html>.

3. On Kennedy, civil rights, and the 1960 election, see Mark Stern, *Calculating Visions: Kennedy, Johnson, and Civil Rights* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); James L. Sundquist and Brookings Institution, *Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1968); Irving Bernstein, *Promises Kept: John F. Kennedy's New Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Carl M. Brauer, *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

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5. For African Americans and U.S. foreign policy after World War II, see Thomas Borstelmann, *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle: The United States and Southern Africa in the Early Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986); Michael L. Krenn, *Black Diplomacy: African Americans and the State Department, 1945–1969* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1999); Hollis R. Lynch, *Black American Radicals and the Liberation of Africa: The Council on African Affairs, 1937–1955* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Penny Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

6. "Bunche Blasts D.C. Jim Crow," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 11 June 1949, 1, 4, 13.

7. "U.S. Apology to Ghana for Insult to Envoy," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 May 1960, 6; "Washington Is 'Hardship Post' Say African Envoys," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 26 Nov. 1960, 12.

8. "African Diplomats Hit Race Barrier," *Trends in Housing* 4, 5 (Sept.–Oct. 1960): 1.

9. "America 'Aint Ready,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, 2 Feb. 1961, 2:8; "African Envoys in U.S.A.," *Crisis* 70 (Oct. 1963): 499.

10. "Another African Diplomat Insulted," *Amsterdam News*, 19 May 1962, 1; "Suitable Housing for Only Half of African Diplomats," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 8 Aug. 1961, 2:2.

11. "U.S. Treatment of Africans Gives State Dept. Headache," 3 June 1961, 3; "Maryland-D.C. 'Snubs' Are Wrecking U.S. Foreign Policy," 26 Aug. 1961, 2; "Race Issue International 'Time-Bomb,'" 6 May 1961, 9; "Rep. Powell Presents Bill to Protect Foreign Envoys," 6 May 1961, 9, all in *Baltimore Afro-American*.

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14. "Representative African Reaction to Recent Incidents in the U.S. Involving African Diplomats," enclosed in Donald M. Wilson to Frederick G. Dutton, 27 Apr. 1961, RG 59, Williams Papers, A-O, box 2, Discrimination—African Visitors, NA.

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