The Junction:

The Cold War, Civil Rights, and the African Diplomats of Maryland's Route 40 NICHOLAS MURRAY VACHON

The Bonnie Brae Diner on Route 40, just outside of Edgewood, Maryland, was an unlikely spot for a crisis of American foreign relations. On June 26, 1961, Adam Malick Sow, the newly-appointed ambassador of Chad to the United States, left New York for Washington, D.C., where he planned to present his diplomatic credentials to President John F. Kennedy. Just after crossing the Maryland border, Sow stopped at a service station and headed for the nearby Bonnie Brae, hoping to cure a headache with a cup of coffee. Upon entering the diner, however, he was informed that the restaurant did not serve people of his skin color. "That's the way it is here," said the proprietress. Sow—using an interpreter—told her that he was a diplomat, and explained to her that such discrimination would not benefit her country's relations with Africa, only to be rebuffed a second time. Specifically, he was told to get his "ass" out. His headache having turned to humiliation, Sow left without further protest.

Half a world away, news of the incident spread. On July 12, the New China News Agency of Communist China broadcast propaganda concerning the event across all of Asia.⁴ Although notorious for its communist spin on American news, the agency did not misconstrue the event in any way, opting instead to reproduce exactly the text from an article in the previous day's *New York Times*.⁵ Jim Crow, evidently, provided propaganda on par with the most inventive of Communist fabrications.

Adam Malick Sow's confrontation with Jim Crow was one of many incidents of discrimination against African diplomats that occurred on Route 40 in 1961. Before the year's end, dozens of officials from Sierra Leone, Niger, Cameroon, Togo and numerous other African nations would receive similar introductions to American racism. The incidents in themselves were by no means anomalous of American society. They were replays of episodes that blacks—both American and foreign—had experienced and re-experienced for decades. But the 1961 context in which these incidents of discrimination occurred transformed what were otherwise ordinary events into an extraordinary moment in history. The African diplomats' encounters with Jim Crow segregation on Route 40 merged the Cold War with the American Civil Rights Movement and African decolonization. They created a situation where the Kennedy administration could not advance its foreign policy objectives without confronting the issue of civil rights, and where civil rights organizations could not push for civil rights reform without taking a stance on the Cold War. The incidents forced these two parties to navigate a complex juncture of dynamic forces, and ultimately spurred a mutual realization that the African diplomats of Route 40 had momentarily aligned the Kennedy administration's commitment to Cold War foreign policy with the objectives of civil rights organizations in Maryland.

The Route 40 incidents occurred as Africa was emerging from the backwaters of U.S. foreign policy and becoming a relevant battleground of the Cold War. When seventeen African nations received independence in 1960, newspapers across the country proclaimed 1960 the "Year of Africa." The quantity of newly independent African nations alone was cause for notice in foreign affairs. Over the course of a few months, African decolonization had disturbed the balance of power in the United Nations, creating an unaligned African voting bloc that comprised nearly one-fourth of the General Assembly. The ability of the United States to effectively influence the U.N., therefore, hinged on building and maintaining cordial relations with these new member countries.

Furthermore, John F. Kennedy entered the oval office with a prevailing interest in African affairs. In 1957, John F. Kennedy had controversially criticized the Eisenhower administration for its cautious inaction on Algerian independence. "The sweep of [African] nationalism," the then-freshman Senator declared, "is the most potent factor in foreign affairs today. We can resist it or ignore it but for only a little while; we can see it exploited by the Soviets with grave consequences; or we in this country can give it hope and leadership, and thus improve immeasurably our standing and our security." Kennedy became Chairman of the African Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1958, and America's "lost ground in Africa" was a significant part of his presidential platform in 1960.

¹ "Big Step Ahead: The Anger that Inflamed Route 40," *Life*, December 8, 1961, 32.

² Pedro A. Sanjuan, "Oral History Interview," interview by Dennis O'Brien, August 6, 1969, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, 27.

³ Report, Report of Incident Involving Ambassador Malick Sow of Chad, "Chad: General, 1961-1962" folder, John F. Kennedy President's Office Files, Series 9, Box 113, John F. Kennedy Library.

⁴ Peking NCNA, "Chad Envoy Victim of U.S. Discrimination," *Daily Report: Foreign Radio Broadcasts, FBIS-FRB-61*-139, July 20, 1961, BBB11, December 8 2011, www.infoweb.newsbank.com.

⁵ "Maryland Apologizes to Four African Envoys," New York Times, July 12, 1961.

⁶ "UN Assembly Meet No Dud," The Chicago Defender, October 12, 1960.

⁷ Richard D. Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 22.

⁸ Arthur M. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 554.

His campaign speeches frequently referenced African affairs, reminding audiences that African nations were already beginning to fall under the Soviet sphere of influence. Communism was gaining support in Ghana, Czechoslovakia was shipping weapons to Guinea, and the Soviet Union had taken the side of Patrice Lumumba in the unstable Democratic Republic of the Congo. Eisenhower, Kennedy maintained, had done nothing to help build U.S. relations with Africa. It was natural, therefore, for President Kennedy to be concerned when racism towards African diplomats damaged relations that were by his estimates already weak.

Kennedy was far less committed to the domestic issue of civil rights. During his presidential campaign, Kennedy had declared that the next president "must be prepared to move forward in the field of human rights…as a legislative leader, as Chief Executive, and as the center of the moral power of the United States." He must "place himself in the very thick of the fight." Accordingly, Kennedy pledged to sign an Executive Order Against Discrimination in Federally Assisted Housing and issue another executive order desegregating the National Guard soon after taking office. ¹¹

Despite these pledges, the first year of the Kennedy presidency saw little civil rights reform. In fact, the president announced to his staff in the days after his inauguration that his strategy for 1961 would be one of "minimum civil rights legislation." He postponed the promised executive action on federally assisted housing and the National Guard and instead pursued other facets of his presidential agenda. Even when civil rights activists bombarded the White House mailroom with tens of thousands of pens adorned with the words "one stroke of the pen,"—providing more than enough ink for the signing of an executive order—Kennedy refused to follow through on his campaign promises.¹³

Historians and memoirists differ in their explanations of this reversal, but all base their arguments to some extent on the fact that the segregated South was an important voting bloc for the Democratic Party. Historian Carl Brauer argues that Kennedy took strong executive action, but was the victim of a Congress dominated by Southerners when it came to passing legislation, while Nick Bryant claims in *The Bystander* that Kennedy's executive and legislative programs were "inactive" because he simultaneously overestimated the Southern Democratic Caucus's strength and underestimated his own public backing." The memoirs of Kennedy Administration officials offer more personal explanations. Harris Wofford, special assistant to the president on civil rights, recalled that Kennedy had a tendency to make decisions on civil rights "hurriedly, at the last minute, in response to Southern political pressures without careful consideration of an overall strategy." And Kennedy-loyalist Arthur Schlesinger wrote that the president had in the first months of his presidency "a terrible ambivalence about civil rights" and a firm belief "that there was no possible chance of passing a civil rights bill."

Instead of legislation, Kennedy pushed for civil rights "reforms" that were primarily symbolic in nature. For instance, his inauguration deliberately showcased African Americans. Mahalia Jackson—the "Queen of Gospel"—sang the national anthem, jazz music legends performed, and a total of some 5,000 African Americans were invited to the plethora of festivities. Furthermore, Kennedy ordered that an African American be included in his secret service detail, instructed the U.S. government as a whole to hire more African Americans, and nominated Thurgood Marshall for the position of federal judge in the state of New York. ¹⁸ These gestures were far from actual legislation, but they succeeded in creating the public perception of progress among the African American population. ¹⁹

Kennedy was most likely introduced to the issue of racism against African diplomats on August 28, 1960, over a month before the election that would deliver him the presidency. In a *Washington Post* article entitled "D.C. is a Hardship Post for Negro Diplomats," reporter Milton Viorst described the prejudice African diplomats encountered in housing and public accommodations: "[The diplomat] has learned to live in 'colored' hotels, eat in 'colored' restaurants, spend his evenings in 'colored' movies. When asked how he accepts it, he shrugs and calls it a hazard of his profession." Particularly significant was the testimony of a source—identified only as an "important African"—that placed the discrimination in the Cold War context: "We have no particular affection for Russians," the source stated, "but their imperialism isn't racist." Kennedy, understanding the significance of the issue, immediately wrote

⁹ Mahoney, Ordeal in Africa, 36-52.

¹⁰ Harris Wofford, Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980), 124.

¹¹ Nick Bryant, The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 226.

¹² Wofford, Of Kennedy and Kings, 133.

¹³ Bryant, The Bystander, 226.

¹⁴ Carl M. Brauer, John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 88.

¹⁵ Bryant, The Bystander, 193, 197, 225.

¹⁶ Wofford, Of Kennedy and Kings, 124.

¹⁷ Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 930.

¹⁸ Bryant, The Bystander, 210-211.

¹⁹ Bryant, The Bystander, 292.

²⁰ Milton Viorst, "D.C. is a Hardship Post for Negro Diplomats," Washington Post, August 28, 1960.

to President Eisenhower's Secretary of State, Christian Herter, stating his concern about the effects of racism against African diplomats on U.S. foreign relations.²¹ Moreover, the issue remained salient during the first days after Kennedy's inauguration, during which time it merited discussion from important officials like Attorney General and brother-to-the-President Robert Kennedy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk.²²

The Kennedy administration initially attempted to shield diplomats from racism while avoiding any sort of heated confrontation with segregationists. Following the completion of a 29-page State Department report entitled "Diplomats and Discrimination in Washington"²³ on February 20, 1961, Secretary of State Dean Rusk created the Special Protocol Service Section (SPSS) of the Office of Protocol. Under the direction of the report's author, Assistant to the Chief of Protocol Pedro Sanjuan, the SPSS quickly took steps to address the problem. The SPSS's first action was to issue a friendly plea for voluntary desegregation of housing to the Washington Real Estate Board. When the plea yielded no results, however, Sanjuan did not push the issue further. He was well aware that doing so would have attracted publicity, turned a diplomatic issue into a more contentious one of civil rights, and risked the alienation of southern Democrats in Congress. Instead, Sanjuan dedicated his efforts to creating a system that would assist diplomats in navigating their discriminatory environment. The SPSS became the official intermediary between African diplomats and Washington landlords. It surveyed real estate brokers to locate housing that was "available to all diplomats" and then cross-referenced this data with surveys from African embassies regarding current and anticipated housing needs. If a desegregated property met the needs of an African diplomat, SPSS would play the role of real estate matchmaker and guide the two parties through the contract process.²⁴ Thus, the overarching strategy at this point was not to fight segregation, but rather to give special services to African diplomats and in doing so minimize their encounters with racist institutions.

The Kennedy Administration's initial response to the incidents of discrimination on Route 40 displayed a similar strategy. On March 9, in an incident foreshadowing Adam Malick Sow's trip to the Bonnie Brae, Sierra Leonean Ambassador Dr. William H. Fitzjohn was denied service at a Howard Johnson restaurant in Hagerstown, Maryland. When State Department officials learned of the incident on April 5, they immediately made extensive efforts to mend relations with Fitzjohn. Sanjuan telephoned an apology to Ambassador Fitzjohn and Chief of Protocol Angier Biddle Duke met with Fitzjohn on April 9 to assure him that action was being taken prevent the recurrence of such an unfortunate event. On April 10, the Mayor of Hagerstown and Howard D. Johnson (*the* Howard Johnson) issued pubic apologies. To finish off the barrage of apologies, President Kennedy hosted Ambassador Fitzjohn at the White House on April 27, where he agreed to procure more U.S. scholarships for Sierra Leonean students. ²⁶

Internal administration memoranda from this period reveal that these public displays of commitment to Ambassador Fitzjohn were accompanied by cautious and politically safe measures taken against Maryland's prevailing system of segregation. The president wrote to Maryland Governor J. Millard Tawes asking that he use his "personal influence and public office...to ensure that proper hospitality is extended to our foreign visitors." He also sent an inquiry to the Justice Department asking if the federal government's legal jurisdiction over segregated Howard Johnson restaurants. But upon receiving a lukewarm response from Tawes and a negative reply from the Justice Department, Kennedy followed the precedent of his earlier response to housing discrimination against African diplomats. He instructed Secretary of Commerce Luther Hodges to solicit Maryland businesses for voluntary desegregation. Page A memorandum, sent from Hodges to the President on June 6, was particularly indicative of Kennedy's attitude toward the civil rights facet of the Route 40 incidents: "Regarding the elimination of racial discrimination by private business and industry in the United States... I am very glad you agree that under the present conditions we should move very

²¹ Letter, John F. Kennedy to Joseph Sattherwaite, November 9, 1960, "Discrimination against African Diplomats in Washington D.C. 1 of 3" folder, Winifred Armstrong Papers, Series 1, Box 1, JFKL.

²² Letter, Dean Rusk to Robert Kennedy, January 31, 1961, "Civil Rights Miscellaneous 1960-1/62" folder, White House Staff Files, Harris Wofford Alphabetical File, Box 2, JFKL.

²³ Report to Secretary of State, Discrimination and Diplomats in Washington, February 20, 1961, "Human Rights: 2: FG 216 (District of Columbia): Executive" folder, White House Central Subject Files, box 365, JFKL. White House Central Subject Files, John F. Kennedy Library

²⁴ Report, Progress Report on the Public Affairs Unit of the Office of Protocol, April 1961, "Progress reports: 1961 April-December" folder, Papers of Pedro A. Sanjuan, series 1, Box 1, JFKL.

²⁵ Letter, Pedro A. Sanjuan to Angier Biddle Duke, April 18, 1961, Bard Library, Baltimore City Community College, http://users.erols.com/bccsbs/fitzjohn.htm.

²⁶ Milton Viorst, "Kennedy Apologizes to African Envoy," Washington Post, Times Herald, April 29, 1961.

²⁷ Letter, John F. Kennedy to J. Millard Tawes, April 18, 1961, "Interracial Incident-Riverside Park 1962" folder, S1041 Governor (general file) series, box 1467, Maryland State Archives.

²⁸ Memorandum, Burke Marshall to Frederick G. Dutton, April 18, 1961, "Human Rights: 2-3: Living-Dining facilities: Executive" folder, White House Central Subject Files, box 373, JFKL.

²⁹ Letter, John F. Kennedy to Luther Hodges, May 11, 1961, "Human Rights: 2-3: Living-Dining facilities: Executive" folder, White House Central Subject Files, box 373, JFKL.

slowly."³⁰ His intention, as a State Department memorandum summarized, "[was] that constructive action [would] be initiated promptly and the results [would] speak for themselves without any heralding in advance."³¹ Kennedy hoped that some businesses would desegregate and in doing so provide immediate public demonstrations of progress.

These public efforts on behalf of African diplomats, however, prompted protests from African Americans. From the African American perspective, the SPSS's efforts to end discrimination against African diplomats indicated that the Kennedy administration was more committed to protecting foreigners than the rights of American citizens. A political cartoon published in the *Washington Afro-American* captured the sentiment precisely. It portrayed an African American dressed in traditional African garb under the caption, "There! Now you can get an apartment in your own country!"³²

The historical significance of these protests against the SPSS policy is rooted in the racial equality movements of the 1940s. In the years leading up to and immediately following World War II, African Americans had viewed their quest for equal rights as part of an international movement against colonialism. Leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois, who had helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Paul Robeson, the leftist co-founder of the Council on African Affairs (CAA), advanced the idea of "Pan-Africanism." The 1945 Pan African Congress in Manchester, England had declared, "We believe the success of Afro-Americans is bound up with the emancipation of all African peoples and also other dependent peoples and laboring classes everywhere." Africans and the African diaspora, in other words, were united in their common experience of oppression.

The beginning of the Cold War and the concomitant rise of McCarthyism, however, forced African Americans to abandon Pan-Africanism and its implicit critiques of U.S. foreign policy. Organizations that questioned America's alliances with colonial powers risked being accused of disloyalty. Support for independence movements in Africa, so the argument went, threatened the economic stability of the nations of Western Europe and jeopardized their ability to resist Communism. African American groups that maintained their Pan-Africanist approach, such as Paul Robeson's Council on African Affairs, became the victims of government investigation and quickly fell into decline.³⁴ Put simply, these organizations could not convincingly claim to be ardent anticommunists and patriotic Americans as long as they continued asserting their membership in an international African diaspora.

The NAACP managed to survive the McCarthy era, but its survival came at the price of its Pan-Africanism. Anxious to escape the fate of the CAA, the Association's leadership betrayed its anti-colonialist principles and endorsed idea of the United States as the leader of the free world. It supported President Truman's Marshall Plan and doctrine of containment—both of which propped up the ailing colonial powers of Western Europe—and purged its ranks of all members with possible ties to communist organizations in an attempt to demonstrate its patriotism.³⁵ In 1948, the NAACP leadership severed the association's strongest link to Pan-Africanism by firing its founder, W.E.B. Du Bois.³⁶ The international commitment of the organization had dissolved and been replaced by a focus on domestic civil rights.³⁷ For the entirety of the 1950s, the NAACP remained relatively absent from discussions of global civil rights.

But the wave of decolonization that swept through Africa in 1960 and 1961, combined with the election of John F. Kennedy, changed Africa's McCarthy-era relationship to the Cold War. Where the United States had once viewed African independence as a threat to its allies in Western Europe, the recent successes of decolonization movements transformed Africa into a Cold War battleground. Africans became unaligned participants in the global Cold War, and consequently winning their hearts and minds became an important focus of United States foreign policy. The implications of this shift for African Americans came to the fore on Route 40 in the summer of 1961.

The political cartoon in the *Washington Afro-American* was only one expression of the belief that the Kennedy Administration was giving African diplomats undue priority over the African Americans on Route 40. One editorialist wrote:

³⁰ Letter, Luther H. Hodges to John F. Kennedy, June 1, 1961, "Human Rights: 2-3: Living-Dining facilities: Executive" folder, White House Central Subject Files, Human Rights (HU) series, box 373, JFKL.

³¹ Memorandum, Frederick G. Dutton to Herbert Klotz, May 18, 1961, "Human Rights: 2-3: Living-Dining facilities: Executive" folder, White House Central Subject Files, box 373, JFKL.

³² Chuck Gray, "There! Now you can get an apartment in your own country," Washington Afro-American, July 15, 1961.

³³ Padmore in a *Defender* clipping "Pan-Africans Extend Greetings to Negro America", in papers of W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, reel 57, frame 1071, (1980) The 1945 Pan African Congress was a gathering of black leaders from Africa, Europe, the United States of America, and the Caribbean that addressed the issues of Pan-Africanism. The Congress elected W.E.B. Du Bois as its president.

³⁴ Penny M. Von Eschen, Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism 1937-1957 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997, 124.

³⁵ Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 187-188.

³⁶ Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*, 116-117.

³⁷ Carol Anderson, Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6-7.

The State Department has shown considerable concern regarding the humiliating experience of Dr. Fitzjohn and reportedly is seeking to set up safeguards against repetition of such insults to foreign diplomats. The State Department, however, appears to be blandly unaware that such insults and humiliations are suffered daily by colored Americans...³⁸

Furthermore, in a telegram to Governor Tawes written on behalf of the Maryland State Conference of the NAACP, Baltimore NAACP President Dr. Lillie M. Jackson wrote that Maryland's restaurant owners were not complying with Kennedy's requests to voluntarily desegregate and that equal treatment for African diplomats could only be insured through the passage of public accommodations legislation.³⁹ By far the most effective critique of the Kennedy Administration's policy came from an inventive piece of reporting by the *Baltimore Afro-American*. On August 29, George Collins and Rufus Wells donned tuxedos and joined Herbert Mangrum, clad in flowing maroon robes and a gem-encrusted leopard-skin covered crown, for a trip to the white-only restaurants of Route 40. The trio borrowed a limousine from a funeral home and adopted the fake accents and false identities of diplomats from the fictional east-African country of Goban. They were, as George Collins would later write, "home-grown Africans." As they drove from restaurant to restaurant, their experiences varied. One restaurant demanded to see their diplomatic credentials; another served them in a separate room; others served them like regular customers. But they were never rejected immediately, as they would have been had they dressed as African Americans.^{40,41}

These protests revealed that the nature of the way in which African Americans viewed their relationship to Africa in 1961 had fundamentally changed since the 1940s. What fueled the writings and cartoons of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Washington Afro-American*, and the NAACP was not a sense of Pan-Africanist brotherhood with the victim diplomats or a more general feeling of anger toward racism, but rather the hypocrisy of the U.S. government's policy of assisting foreigners and not its own citizens. The Cold War and McCarthyism had left its mark on African Americans, for despite their renewed consciousness of international blacks, they viewed the incidents of discrimination on Route 40 not with the eyes of an *African* American, but rather with those of an African *American*. The continent that had represented such a quintessential piece of the black identity to W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson in the 1940s was now a strange land differentiated from the United States by its strange dialects and styles of dress. African Americans, evidently, came to believe that their experience in America—regardless of what such an experience specifically entailed—had made them fundamentally different from Africans.

While the Route 40 incidents highlighted the divide between African Americans and Africans, the incidents also caused civil rights reform in Maryland to converge with President Kennedy's fixation on winning the Cold War. The reaction of the Lagos, Nigeria *Daily Mail* to William Fitzjohn's unfortunate visit to the Howard Johnson demonstrated that the domestic issue of civil rights had severe implications for foreign policy:

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 Klu Klux Klan officials can bring world peace. The qualities of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson are non-existent any more in America.⁴²

Jim Crow, evidently, was not a selling point for U.S.-African relations. And Kennedy, no stranger to the power of symbolism, surely recognized that the Route 40 incidents had the potential to become a powerful demonstration of the argument that he lacked dedication to the cause of civil rights; special treatment for African diplomats, as so many African American newspapers made apparent, was doing no favors for Kennedy's relations with civil rights organizations. The Route 40 incidents, therefore, created a situation in which substantive civil rights reform made political sense from both foreign and domestic policy perspectives. All Kennedy had to do was realize such conditions existed.

That realization came during a meeting with Adam Malick Sow. When Adam Malick Sow left the Bonnie Brae Diner in humiliation on June 26, he continued on to Washington, where he was scheduled to have his inaugural meeting as Ambassador of Chad with President Kennedy the next day. The morning of the meeting, Malick Sow reported his experience of Jim Crow hospitality to Pedro Sanjuan and the SPSS. What Sanjuan knew—and likely

³⁸ "Worldwide Effect of Jim Crow," Washington Afro-American, April 18, 1961.

³⁹ Telegram, Lillie M. Jackson to John F. Kennedy, July 7, 1961, "Human Rights: 2-3 (Living-Dining facilities): General" folder, White House Central Staff Files, "Human rights (HU)" series, box 373, JFKL.

⁴⁰ George Collins, "Everybody Eats But Americans," in *Reporting Civil Rights* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2003), 1:607-618.

⁴¹ Rufus Wells, "Mr. Charlie fooled by costume," Washington Afro American, August 26, 1961.

⁴² Memorandum, "Department of State for the Press," September 19, 1961, "Meetings: Campaign in Maryland for the passage of Public Accommodations Bill, 1 September 1961" folder, Pedro A. Sanjuan Papers, series 1, box 1, JFKL.

did not tell Malick Sow—was that the incident represented the fourth one of its kind in the past two weeks; President Kennedy's attempt to spur the restaurants of Route 40 to voluntarily desegregation had clearly failed.⁴³ Sanjuan, perhaps hoping the Kennedy would take more direct action, suggested to Malick Sow that he mention the incident to the president in his meeting.⁴⁴

The meeting began with the usual exchange of pleasantries. Malick Sow presented his credentials and made a statement on behalf of the Chadian government, all while Kennedy charmed his guest with displays of his very limited grasp of the French language. At the meeting's conclusion, however, Malick Sow recounted his experience at the Bonnie Brae to the president. According to Pedro Sanjuan's account of the meeting, the president then "got very angry," before turning to Sanjuan and asking "What's happening over there? Was this a mistake?" Sanjuan's response: "No, this happens every day. This happens very frequently Mr. President. It's a great problem we've got." With that, Kennedy authorized Sanjuan to contact Governor Tawes of Maryland and take action to "end all this business." "45"

This meeting between Malick Sow and Kennedy served as the impetus for a coordinated campaign on the part of the White House and SPSS "to correct segregation to the maximum extent possible in the places of public accommodation along the highways in [Maryland]." Sanjuan, in collaboration with Special Assistants to the President Frederick Dutton and Harris Wofford, set out to create public support for the passage of public accommodations legislation in the Maryland General Assembly and simultaneously encourage the voluntary desegregation of Route 40 restaurants. Their best chance of success, as Dutton put it, was "to make a hell of a lot of noise."

Aside from giving Sanjuan the initial authorization to "end all this business," President Kennedy was almost entirely uninvolved in the campaign's planning and execution. Given the amount of publicity the Route 40 incidents had already received, Sanjuan, Wofford, and Dutton exercised a remarkable degree of autonomy. They operated without presidential oversight, and even felt free to ascribe Kennedy's name to statements, telegrams, and letters. Kennedy, as Wofford later recalled, had given him a "full green light. He didn't particularly want to hear about [the campaign] because he was busy, but I didn't have any doubt but that I had a mandate to do anything that I could get away with as a special assistant to the president" Such a mandate, in hindsight, led to a push for civil rights reform that far exceeded the narrow expectations Kennedy had announced to his staff during the first days of his presidency.

The intensive effort commenced on September 13, when Sanjuan testified before the Maryland State Legislature. In an unprecedented exchange between a federal official concerned with foreign affairs and a state legislature focused on domestic matters, Sanjuan urged Maryland's lawmakers to pass a bill ending segregation in all public accommodations. In the following weeks, the restaurant owners of Route 40 received letters signed "John F. Kennedy" that urged an end to segregationist policies; the State Department sent weekly press releases to all area newspapers detailing the impact of the Route 40 incidents on the United States' image abroad; and speakers gave lectures to relevant civil groups across the state. On September 25, during a speech before a gathering of over 200 Maryland leaders in Aberdeen, Maryland, a member of the president's Committee for Equal Employment Opportunities read a telegram that newspapers would label a "personal plea" from President Kennedy. The plea, admittedly, had been written by Harris Wofford during his drive from Washington D.C. to Aberdeen.

In drafting these letters, press releases, and speeches, Sanjuan and his collaborators took full advantage of the two different arguments for desegregation that converged on Route 40. The fabricated Kennedy telegram in Aberdeen, for example, alternated between two appeals. First, it addressed the Cold War argument that segregation was driving African nations toward the Communist Bloc: "I want them [the diplomats], to see that this country fully lives in the principles of freedom and equality of opportunity for which we are striving in the world," Second, it addressed

⁴³ Report, Report of Incident Involving Ambassador Malick Sow of Chad, "Chad: General, 1961-1962" folder, Papers of John F, Kennedy, "President's Office Files" series, box 113, JFKL.

⁴⁴ Pedro A. Sanjuan, "Oral History Interview," interview by Dennis O'Brien, August 6, 1969, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-28 & 32.

⁴⁶ Letter, Frederick G. Dutton to W.T. Armstrong, August 25, 1961, "Human Rights: 2-3: Living-Dining facilities: Executive" folder, White House Central Staff Files, John F. Kennedy Library, http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKWHCSF-373-006.

⁴⁷ Pedro A. Sanjuan, "Oral History Interview," interview by Dennis O'Brien, August 6, 1969, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, 29. ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁹ Harris L. Wofford, "Oral History Interview," interview by Larry Hackman, May 22, 1968, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, 57.

⁵⁰ Lloyd Garrison, "Maryland Asked to Assist Envoys," New York Times, September 14, 1961.

⁵¹ Letter, Frederick G. Dutton to Edmund Mester, "Interracial Incident-Riverside Park 1962" Folder, S1041 Governor (general file) series, box 1467, Maryland State Archives

⁵² Memorandum, Frederick G. Dutton to Alice Dunnigan, August 28, 1961, "Human Rights: 2-3: Living-Dining Facilities: Executive" folder, White House Central Subject Files, "Human Rights (HU) series, box 373, JFKL.

⁵³ Report, "Progress Report Special Protocol Service Section," September 1, 1961, "Progress reports: 1961 April-December" folder, Papers of Pedro A. Sanjuan, "SPSS files" series, box 1, JFKL.

⁵⁴ "Maryland gets Kennedy Plea," *The Washington Post, Times Herald,* September 26, 1961.

⁵⁵ Pedro A. Sanjuan, "Oral History Interview," interview by Dennis O'Brien, August 6, 1969, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, 30.

the civil rights argument that discrimination against any individual was immoral irrespective of his or her nationality: "it is most important that there be no discrimination of any kind based on race, creed or color against any American citizen or visitor from abroad. That is basic to our moral strength at home and the Nation's leadership in the world."⁵⁶

The hybrid nature of the message enabled the Kennedy Administration to simultaneously speak to both sides of the civil rights movement in Maryland. References to America's image abroad and the implications that discrimination against diplomats had in the U.S.-Soviet competition for Africa engaged the white restaurant owners who refused to see the basic injustice of Jim Crow segregation, while also pacifying the Southern democrats in Congress. At the same time, the allusions to the underlying morality of civil rights reform catered to the African Americans and Civil Rights Organizations who had earlier protested the hypocrisy of SPSS's special efforts on behalf of African diplomats.

While the Kennedy Administration officials involved in the Maryland campaign usually included both arguments in any appeal for voluntary desegregation and public accommodations legislation, they often emphasized the justification that a given audience would find most attractive. A member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, in a speech to a group of restaurant owners on October 9, cast the Route 40 incidents almost entirely in the context of the Cold War. "The total fight the Communists are making today is not being waged with bullets," he began.

...It is being waged largely through propaganda, through an attempt by the Communists to prove... that their life is better than ours...We welcome this battle of ideals. Whether you realize it or not you are key participants. In a very real sense <u>you</u> have the opportunity to shows world what America is and what free people will do on their own to prove that in this Country we don't just preach freedom—we mean it.⁵⁷

The restaurant owners, according to the speech, were not being asked to assist the cause of racial equality, but rather the cause of American victory against the Soviet Union. In an interview with the *Washington Afro-American*, on the other hand, Chief of Protocol Angier Biddle Duke reasoned that the SPSS and the White House were fighting for African Americans in their efforts to prevent discrimination against African diplomats. "When we secure equal treatment for one member of the community, we secure equal treatment for all. When we take a step forward for the international community, the American community moves forward." The suggestion, therefore, was that the Cold War motivation for the campaign to desegregate Route 40 did not to overshadow the fact that the Kennedy administration was engaging in a concerted effort to desegregate public accommodations in Maryland.

Civil rights organizations, evidently, understood Duke's point. On October 9, 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) began to consider the idea that a large-scale demonstration might accelerate the pace of the Kennedy administration's Maryland Campaign. A letter to Gordon Carey, Field Director of CORE, revealed their rationale: "The State Department has by its interfering in the 'internal affairs' of the state of Maryland given us a perfect in, it seems a shame to pass it by." CORE, having witnessed the dual arguments underpinning the Kennedy Administration's Maryland campaign, realized that the unique circumstances of the Route 40 incidents had created an opportunity. While they acknowledged that "a growing portion of the American negro community resents the special privileges foreign Negros are accorded," they recognized that they could borrow the Kennedy administration's Cold War pragmatism as a justification for a protest against the segregated restaurants on Route 40. Demonstrating that African Americans now wished to emphasize the American aspect of their identity over the African aspect, CORE resolved to push for an end result on Route 40 that would assist the United States' efforts in the Cold War.

The previous May, CORE had organized the first of the famous Freedom Rides that took buses filled with black and white civil rights activists down the highways of the American South. The integrated group attempted to desegregate the bus stations along the way, but in doing so were ambushed multiple times by violent mobs of Southern segregationists. Such violence attracted an extensive amount of media attention for the cause of civil rights and exposed to the world the brutality of racism in America.⁶¹ The Freedom Ride tactic, given that it was designed to protest segregated facilities on highways, appeared applicable to Maryland's Route 40. Thus, on October 13, CORE

⁵⁶ Letter, John F. Kennedy to John Field, September 22, 1961, "Human Rights: 2: ST 16 (Kansas)-ST 23 (Minnesota): Executive" folder, White House Central Staff Files, John F. Kennedy Library, http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKWHCSF-366-004

⁵⁷ Statement, Berl I. Bernhard to Restaurant Owners, October 9, 1961, "Correspondence-Alphabetical African Diplomats, Rte 40 incident" folder, Papers of Berl I. Bernhard, "Commission on Civil Rights 1958-1963" series, box 2, JFKL.

⁵⁸ "For Africans and you too, the State Department Says," Washington Afro-American, September 9, 1961.

⁵⁹ Letter, Joe Steinfeld to Gordon Carey, October 9, 1961, *Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality, 1941-1967* (microfilm 115 reels, Microfilming Corporation of America 1980), no. 495, reel 46.

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⁶¹ For more information on the Freedom Rides, see Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Rides: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

issued an ultimatum to Maryland Governor J. Millard Tawes. Unless the governor agreed to call a special session of the Maryland General Assembly in November for the purpose of passing legislation banning discrimination in public accommodations, the Congress of Racial Equality would hold a Freedom Ride on Route 40 with 1000 of its members to test the extent to which roadside restaurants were desegregated. ^{62,63}

But just as SPSS had failed to account for how African Americans would receive initial strategy of providing special treatment to African diplomats, CORE did not fully consider the response of the Maryland state government. The Route 40 incidents had presented CORE with the opportunity to advance its own agenda by arguing that its goals would improve the image of the United States abroad. Yet CORE's decision to use a freedom ride—the tactic that months earlier had produced images of violent mobs and firebombed buses—undermined its ability to enlist the Cold War argument. Furthermore, the confrontational nature of a freedom ride implied that CORE was working against the Maryland government, even though the convergence of Cold War and civil rights imperatives on Route 40 had aligned the government's interests with those of CORE.

Thus, Maryland officials argued that a freedom ride was absolutely unnecessary and had the potential to "disrupt an already delicate situation."⁶⁴ Governor Tawes stated, "It is my belief that there is not yet sufficient evidence to indicate that an effective equal accommodations bill can be enacted at a special session of the General Assembly now." In fact, an "influx of 'Freedom Riders' in Maryland will seriously jeopardize chances for enactment of equal accommodations legislation" in the future.⁶⁵ William C. Rogers Sr., head of the Maryland Commission on Interracial Problems and Relations, took a similar position: "to call a special session of the legislature at this time without further cultivation will in the opinion of experts result in defeat of equal accommodations legislation."

These protests, just like the African American outcry toward the initial strategies of the SPSS, revealed that the numerous issues wrapped up in the Route 40 incidents made the situation extremely difficult to navigate. As a result of these predictions of defeat, CORE lessened its demands, agreeing to "postpone" the freedom ride if "25 or 30" restaurants agreed to desegregate voluntarily.⁶⁷

By November, the threat of an impending Freedom Ride and the continued efforts of the SPSS and the White House had a significant effect on the restaurant owners of Route 40. On November 8, following news that thirty-five restaurants along Route 40 had voluntarily desegregated, CORE announced the postponement of its Freedom Ride. They labeled it a "Thanksgiving present for the American people." For Governor Tawes, it was "heart-warming news." Pedro Sanjuan, more sober in his evaluation, saw it as a demonstration of "considerable progress," but by no means an indication of total success."

Indeed, CORE's announcement was far from the end of the Route 40 saga. Activists testing the facilities on Route 40 a few weeks later would discover that only 26 of the supposed 35 restaurants had actually desegregated, inciting further threats of freedom rides by CORE. On February 14, 1962, a public accommodations bill was introduced to the Maryland General Assembly only to be "pigeon-holed" by segregationist members. The failed attempt and continued lobbying on the part of the SPSS prompted Governor Tawes to call a special session of the assembly the following month. But the efforts to end Jim Crow in Maryland failed again. In a vote one representative described "the tensest most dramatic roll call I have seen in my 20 years in the House," the Maryland General Assembly rejected the Public Accommodations Bill by a margin of two votes. It would take another year to pass the bill, but this passage only occurred after lawmakers made the bill applicable to only eleven of Maryland's 25 counties.

But the significance of the Route 40 incidents does not stem from the success or failure of the campaign for

⁶² Press Release, J. Millard Tawes to Maryland newspapers, radio and TV, October 27, 1961, "Interracial Incident-Riverside Park 1962" folder, S1041 Governor (General File), box 1467, Maryland State Archives.

^{63 &}quot;Freedom Ride Set for Rte 40," The Washington Post, October 14, 1961.

⁶⁴ Press Release, J. Millard Tawes to Maryland newspapers, radio and TV, October 27, 1961, "Interracial Incident-Riverside Park 1962" folder, S1041 Governor (General File), box 1467, Maryland State Archives.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Statement, "W.C.R. Sr., for CORE Conference," "Interracial Incident-Riverside Park 1962" folder, S1041 Governor (General File), box 1467, Maryland State Archives.

⁶⁷ "Notes taken at meeting on 11-3-61 between C.O.R.E.+Inter-racial commission re-freedom rides," November 3, 1961, "Interracial Incident-Riverside Park 1962" folder, S1041 Governor (General File), box 1467, Maryland State Archives.

⁶⁸ Wendell P. Bradley, "Tawes Sees Bias Ended Voluntarily," *The Washington Post, Herald Times*, November 10, 1961.

⁶⁹ Statement, Governor J. Millard Tawes, November 8, 1961, "Interracial Incident-Riverside Park 1962" folder, S1041 Governor (General File), box 1467, Maryland State Archives

Report, "Progress Report Special Protocol Service Section," December 1, 1961, "Progress reports: 1961 April-December" folder, Papers of Pedro A. Sanjuan, "SPSS files" series, box 1, JFKL.

⁷¹ Report, "Progress Report Special Protocol Service Section," March 1, 1962, "Progress reports: 1962 January-June" folder, Papers of Pedro A. Sanjuan, "SPSS files" series, box 1, JFKL.

⁷² Laurence Stern and Wendell P. Bradley, "CORE Vows Biggest Progest on Md. Defeat," *The Washington Post, Herald Times*, March 11, 1962.

⁷³ William Chapman, "Md. Rights Law Mild Measure," *The Washington Post, Herald Times, March* 13, 1963.

civil rights legislation it produced. Rather, it lies in the fact that such a campaign occurred, born on a Maryland highway out of the collision between foreign and domestic forces. In their attempts to end discrimination against African diplomats, civil rights organizations and the Kennedy administration alike enacted strategies that revealed the difficulties of comprehending the various forces at work on Route 40. Both groups made missteps as they tried to navigate simultaneously the politics of Cold War, Civil Rights, and colonial Africa, and ultimately addressed the uniqueness of the Route 40 incidents with uncharacteristic actions. The Kennedy administration, having vowed not to pursue civil rights legislation during its first year in the White House, led a campaign for public accommodations legislation in Maryland. And civil rights organizations, having removed themselves from the international sphere since the 1940s, promoted a policy that would benefit the United States' global struggle against the Soviet Union. The Route 40 incidents, therefore, serve as a window to the issues of the 1960s, a lens through which to observe the uncertainties created in the context of a changing world.