

# Killing Lumumba<sup>1</sup>

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At the end of June of 1960, Belgium hurriedly relinquished its vast colony of the Congo to the first democratically elected African government. Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, a talented and unrestrained nationalist, led the new Republic of the Congo. A flamboyant and charismatic leader, Lumumba had high hopes as a pan-Africanist for directing his new country into an honored place on the continent and in the world political community. But stability in the just-born country immediately broke down. Uncontrolled, the Congo's army mutinied and spread havoc rather than peace. The military from Belgium intervened to protect its nationals and to gain some power over Lumumba; the Europeans quickly came to detest his brashness, volatility, and lack of deference. In the far southeast of the country, Katanga Province—always suspicious of a centralized nationalism, and especially of Lumumba's fervor—took the opportunity to declare its own independence, seceding from the Republic.

In desperation, the Congo's leaders at once asked the United Nations to get Belgium out, to end the secession, and to put Lumumba's army in good order. By mid-to-late July, peace-keeping troops from fourteen countries had arrived, and ultimately numbered 20,000 as many as in the local military. Fearful of instability in Africa and of the influence of Communism on Lumumba, the United States maneuvered behind the scenes, fretting about the extension of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and America to Africa. In January of 1961, six months after independence, Lumumba was tortured and murdered in breakaway Katanga.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay derives from a lecture delivered at the meeting of the American Philosophical Society on 19 April 2012 and retains some of the informality of that lecture. A more complete exposition of the events surrounding the murder and a fuller interpretation of its meaning can be found in Emmanuel Gerard and Bruce Kuklick, *Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba* (Cambridge M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2015).

For more than 50 years, these events have absorbed many people. Something about Lumumba's trajectory and the manner of his death offended and sickened global opinion. Within a year after the murder, the United Nations conducted an inquiry that was incomplete, falling short of learning all the facts, but was not inaccurate in some of its conclusions. In 1975, in the aftermath of the Watergate scandals and the offenses of President Richard Nixon, the Senate of the United States explored various compromised activities of American presidents in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s. Among many other things, the Senate discovered detailed evidence about plans by the Central Intelligence Agency to assassinate Lumumba.

After Lumumba's death, the United States threw its support to Joseph Mobutu, who ruled the Congo tyrannically for 30 years. When the end of the Cold War weakened Mobutu's rule, the Congo held a "Sovereign National Conference" in 1991. Although many of its conveners were involved in the murder, this body investigated Lumumba's death as one of the most prominent violations of human rights in Africa.

In 2000, years after the American proceedings, Belgians reacted to widespread concern about their nation's complicity and organized a serious examination. Four scholars went over the evidence, and a parliamentary report of 2001 definitively exposed the guilt of Belgium. The country officially apologized to the Congo.

I taught at the University of Pennsylvania, which has an exchange with one of Belgium's leading universities, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. In the mid-1990s, I taught in Leuven on one end of the exchange. The next year, my collaborator in this project, Emmanuel Gerard, came to the United States to teach, and that sealed a friendship between us.

In 2000–02 Gerard served on the Belgian commission's panel of experts, and indeed wrote most of the report. In 2002 he was sitting on a 700-page document—the primary language was Flemish—written in parliamentary-ese, and several hundred pages of primary sources. He naturally wanted to do something more with this work, and at first, we thought about severely editing the documents and translating them into English. That idea was eventually transformed into the project we are now completing, which I call an international history of the assassination.

Gerard was responsible for sources in Europe, mainly but not exclusively in Belgium, and for material about the Congolese. He made two trips to the Congo. I took care of the American sources, scattered in libraries across the United States, and the United Nations documents, located in large unorganized collections in the basements of

UN buildings on the east side of New York. Our history thus integrates the perspectives of four players—the Congo's inexperienced politicians, a self-consciously righteous but flawed UN, an arrogant and destructive United States, and a skilled Belgian bureaucracy.

I would like to tell this very complicated story not so much by telling the American side of it, as by telling the story from the American point of view. To understand the American story, we have to grasp the mindset of the premier global statesman of the period from World War II to the early 1960s, Dwight Eisenhower. Eisenhower had made his reputation from 1942–45 through an invasion of German-held Europe in aid of Britain, France, and the Low Countries. By the end of the war, he was committed to an American role on the continent. Almost single-handedly, Ike dragged his isolationist-tinged Republican party to an Atlantic internationalism. For him, the future of the world lay in a cooperative alliance among the Western democracies, in Europe and North America. The instrument to create this cooperation was NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the security alliance created by the United States in the late 1940s to shield the Western Europeans from pressure from what the Americans believed to be an expansionist Soviet Union during the Cold War. In 1951 and 1952 Eisenhower became NATO's first military leader, before his election to the presidency in 1952, and his re-election in 1956.<sup>2</sup> NATO for Ike was a tool. Its security and military dimension could serve to promote common economic policies and then political and cultural cooperation. He was a very early and most effective proponent of the sorts of initiatives we identify with the Common Market, the European Union, and the Euro currency zone.

For Eisenhower, achieving his goals resembled herding cats, despite his collegial association with Europe's leaders. England under Harold Macmillan's prime ministership cherished a special relationship with the United States and stood off from Europe. President Charles de Gaulle had an entirely unrealistic idea about France as a world power and a certain conceit about the cultural grandeur of his country. Konrad Adenauer, whose West Germany was admitted to NATO in 1955, constantly needed reassurance and often displayed inappropriate longings for independent German power that no one, in the West or in the Soviet bloc, would countenance. Eisenhower saw the Belgians, and the Dutch, as the good soldiers of the alliance, small and weak in themselves, but buoyed up by the attention they received, and eager to please. By urging conciliation, and by promoting the American agenda

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2 See Steve Weber, *Multilateralism in NATO: Shaping the Postwar Balance of Power, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 41–42, 60.

in Europe, the two countries could increase their weight at the bargaining table.

The rise of emerging nations perplexed and sometimes dismayed the president. The Republicans recognized intellectually that the “developing world” influenced the Cold War. Washington also knew that it needed to remind these countries of America’s own past as a dependency of England and sympathize with the later colonies. The United States could chaperone them gradually to freedom and lead the soon-to-be-independent to constructive roles in the global community.

Yet Eisenhower could not adjust adroitly to the issues of imperialism. His invaluable NATO colleagues, many of them old friends, represented the powers forced to disgorge their empires. The United States allowed the British and French—and the Belgians and Dutch—to take the lead in colonial matters. Ike instinctively deferred to the Europeans on this issue and never understood the aspirations of people of color—across the world, or in his own country.<sup>3</sup> The failure of his moral imagination in this respect often made him lag behind opinion that would have won him greater respect in the “developing” world.

When the Congo crisis broke out, Eisenhower was not interested in a confrontation in the Congo, and immediately he and his secretary of state decided that the UN would forward United States interests in this time of uncertainty.<sup>4</sup> The international organization was pro-Western; in addition, its leader, Dag Hammarskjöld, was probably the most capable secretary general the UN has had, and at the time was widely respected by those who were called *Afro-Asians*. The United States would in any event pay for much of the Congo operation of the UN. Moreover, the Americans quickly came to an understanding with Hammarskjöld that would contain Lumumba. The UN and the U.S. began work on a formal agreement whereby the United States would provide technical and financial assistance to the Congo, but it would be administered through the UN; diplomats spoke of how, for a time, while Hammarskjöld charted its appropriate course, the Congo would become a trustee of the United Nations. The international organization would shape the Congo’s destiny, leading it in the direction Hammarskjöld and his associates thought appropriate for the new nation.

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3 See Lawrence S. Kaplan, *NATO and the UN: A Peculiar Relationship* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010), 49–70; and Kathryn Statler and Andrew L. Johns, eds., *The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

4 Memoranda of conversations, 13–21 July, CAH phone calls, 7/1–8/31, Box 13, Christian Herter Papers; Record of NSC Actions, NSC 3, 1960 (2) 2246–2314, Ann Whitman, Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas (hereafter DDE).

Certainly Lumumba was not told this, but he quickly got the message via UN action in his country. Whatever the weaknesses of the new government, Lumumba had asked the UN to enter the Congo, and presumed that Hammarskjöld should be taking orders from the African regime, and not vice versa. By mid-late July, the prime minister was arguing with UN officials in the Congo about their intrusion into his country. They should be at his beck; not the other way around. At the end of July, he flew to New York to confront the UN's leaders with their deficiencies. He had several bruising conversations with Hammarskjöld and other leaders, and then in the middle of these talks went to Washington, where he hoped to make bilateral arrangements with the United States. Lumumba thought that, with independent support from the Americans, he would not be dependent on the UN. This was cogent reasoning, but in the realm of international politics, Lumumba was very naïve.

In Washington, Lumumba did not meet with Eisenhower. As often happened when he wanted to avoid facing a difficulty frontally, the president was away. He maintained his distance on a vacation in Newport, Rhode Island, ostensibly playing golf. Instead, the secretary of state and ranking officials gave Lumumba an almost royal reception. The prime minister received a nineteen-gun salute when he got to Washington's National Airport and was greeted by the secretary of state and other ranking dignitaries. The diplomats put him up at the guest residence for the most elevated VIPs, Blair House, across the street from the White House.

According to CIA sources, he was asked at Blair House what he wanted, and answered "a blond girl." The CIA procured one. Nonetheless, the U.S. chief of protocol refused to acquiesce to this affront to decorum, and Lumumba slept without a partner. The rest of the visit did not go as he wanted, either. That afternoon and the following day, he got nothing from the Americans, who circumvented all queries over aid. The secretary of state and other officials affably and cordially emphasized that they were sure that the Congo would prosper, but that the UN would tend to the Congo's legitimate needs. The Americans coordinated this policy with the United Nations, and urged Lumumba to speak frankly with Hammarskjöld about the Congo's desires.<sup>5</sup> The Republic was to be a ward of the UN.

The prime minister eventually made his way back to Africa, and soon after he left the United States, the repercussions of his visit were felt all over the world, particularly in Belgium. Enraged stories appeared

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<sup>5</sup> See especially Memo of Conversation, 27 July, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960* (hereafter FRUS, 1958-60), 14: 359-66.

in the Belgian press about Lumumba's "preferential" treatment in Washington. The Belgian foreign minister personally called the American ambassador to Brussels and complained. Baudouin, king of the Belgians, had made a state visit to the United States the year before. He had received a twenty-one-gun salute, only two guns more than Lumumba. Moreover, the king had slept in the same Blair House bed as Lumumba.<sup>6</sup>

I want here to make an unscholarly interpretative comment to underscore the racialized nature of this tempest in a teapot. There were other, more important issues than where Lumumba put his head at Blair House, including American and UN pressure on the Belgians themselves to retreat in the Congo, and the fury of the monarchical circle in Belgium over the end of its empire. Nonetheless, the sleeping arrangements were not insignificant. Had the CIA successfully delivered the blond to Lumumba, and the sheets not been changed, and a week later the king had overnighted at Blair House, then one might expect the Belgian outcry. But not otherwise.

The foreign minister was not the only leader to complain. The Belgian prime minister intimated that Belgium might not pay its NATO military dues, and the ambassador at the UN hinted that Brussels was thinking of resigning from the United Nations. The Americans were troubled by these eruptions, but they could be managed. Some discreet conversations about American fidelity to its friendship with Belgium, and quiet diplomacy explaining American policy, would calm these troubled waters. Then, a further voice raised the stakes.

The most important Belgian public figure in the twentieth century was Paul-Henri Spaak. He had served three times as prime minister and later also as foreign secretary. From the mid-to-late 1950s, he was out of Belgium's domestic politics; he was serving as NATO's secretary general, its civilian head. An old associate of Eisenhower's, Spaak championed American initiatives involving economic cooperation among the Europeans. He was the most effective of Ike's partners in Europe.

On 10 August, Spaak wrote an incensed letter to Eisenhower. How could the president expect the Europeans to support the American agenda in Western Europe, while at the same time the U.S. undercut its allies in other parts of the world? NATO was a failure, and Spaak announced his resignation.

Now, as these matters go, Spaak was dissuaded from sending the letter. But he read its contents to the U.S. ambassador at NATO head-

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<sup>6</sup> Burden to Herter, 27 July (345), Box 1954; Burden to Herter, 4 August 123-Burden, Box 315, DOS, RG 59, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

quarters in Paris and had a discussion with the American about his concerns. The next day the ambassador's report on his discussion with Spaak was on Eisenhower's desk in the White House, delivered by the chief liaison between the CIA and the president.<sup>7</sup>

Over the next few days, Eisenhower told small groups of counselors that he had "very much on his mind . . . how NATO can act in harmony on a world-wide scale."<sup>8</sup> On 18 August, the National Security Council held its first meeting to adjudicate this problem. The NSC under Eisenhower was the chief institution that made foreign and national security policy. At that meeting, Eisenhower made his only statement on the record about Lumumba and the Congo.<sup>9</sup>

One note taker at the meeting distinctly remembered that the president ordered the assassination of Lumumba. Some other people at the meeting denied that this was said; others could not remember, and in any event most believed that such raw language would not be written down. What we do have on the record is a lengthy statement by the president, who repeatedly made it clear that the West should not leave the Congo. Ike thought it "inconceivable" that Lumumba would force the UN out. The UN should stay in the Congo under all circumstances. "We were talking about" the impossible—"one man forcing us out of the Congo."

Whatever he said, the president must have made his remarks with some force. In addition to the record of the meeting, the NSC also recorded an action memorandum: what the U.S. would do to implement points made in the conversation. The action memo noted the president's comments and concluded that the administration, in conformity with Eisenhower's views, would take "appropriate action" to prevent Lumumba from pushing the West or the UN out of the Congo.<sup>10</sup>

A subcommittee of the NSC had the role of implementing actions. This committee of four, or special group, consisted of the president's representative, the national security advisor, the head of the CIA, and

7 For the letter, see Spaak to Eisenhower, Paris, 10 August, 6221, Spaak Papers, Louvain La Neuve, Belgium; Freeman (Brussels) to Herter, 10 August, 8-2160, Box 1955, DOS, RG 59, National Archives; and Calhoun to Goodpaster, with top secret enclosure, Wolf to Herter, 10 August, Belgium, Box 1, White House Office, Office of the Staff Secretary, Records, 1952-61, International Series, DDE. And see Robert S. Jordan, *Political Leadership in NATO: A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979), 62, 70-76, 85, 91-94.

8 Herter-Eisenhower conversation, 10 August, FRUS, 1958-60, vol. 7, pt. 2: 402-03; Dillon to embassies, 22 August, FRUS, 1958-60, vol. 7, pt. 1: 295; and Conference with Eisenhower, 16 August, p. 613.

9 Interim Report of the Senate Select Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders* (Washington: USGPO, 1975) (hereafter IR), 64.

10 NSC Meeting, 18 August, FRUS, 1958-60, vol. 14: 422-24. See also Madeline G. Kalb, *The Congo Cables: The Cold War in Africa—From Eisenhower to Kennedy* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1982), 51.



ranking officials of the Department of State and the Department of Defense.

At a special group meeting of 25 August, the CIA reported on a whole series of plans to derail Lumumba. These operations were so well developed that it seems the agency had determined on these activities some days before—that is, that Eisenhower had at once made his wishes known after learning about Spaak's disaffection, and was letting off more steam on 18 August. In any event, the CIA now proposed a number of dirty tricks. The Congo's politicians were to be bribed in the hope that Parliament would make a vote of no confidence in Lumumba; demonstrations against the government by student and labor groups were planned and paid for by the CIA. Money was also given to armed groups, or armaments were purchased for such dissidents in the hope that they would further destabilize the politics of the Congo. Funds were provided by Washington to its CIA chief of station in the Congo, should he need them for other exploits that might weaken Lumumba.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, the national security advisor was not satisfied with the CIA, and over the next several weeks, the Agency was put on notice that these covert activities were not sufficient. The CIA was told that it was not doing enough. Eisenhower had "extremely strong feelings" about the need for "straightforward action." The president wanted "people in the field" to know that they should take "vigorous action." In a conversation that basically took place off the record, the special group agreed not to "rule out 'consideration' of any particular kind of activity which might contribute to getting rid of Lumumba."<sup>12</sup> The CIA on the ground had to act decisively. Even with this elbowing, the CIA did not conclusively respond until more than a month after the NSC meeting of 18 August.

Then, on 19 September, the CIA launched a top-secret communications channel to its man in the Congo. The station chief got "instructions on highest authority to assassinate Lumumba any way you can."<sup>13</sup>

Now we are almost finished, but let me underscore some important points about this story. First, Eisenhower was not really worried about the vulgar rise of Communism in Africa or the menace of Lumumba per se; he was very concerned that NATO would collapse and the United States—and the president—would be embarrassed at the end of his term in office. How could one black man in the jungle wreck the

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11 For the most detailed account, see Stephen R. Weissman, "An Extraordinary Rendition," *Intelligence and National Security* 25 (2010): 198–222.

12 IR, p. 60; Chronology of Lumumba testimonies, 07-M-133, Box 55, Transcripts of Senate Select Committee Hearings (Church Committee), National Archives (hereafter CC).

13 Interview and Meeting Summary with Larry Devlin, 20 August 1975, 07-M-53, Box 53, CC.



democratic internationalism that Eisenhower had overseen for almost 20 years?

Second, part of the reason the cooperative Belgians were in such a snit was that the Americans had allowed poor Lumumba to sleep at Blair House.

Third, let us remember that the CIA is no rogue elephant in this affair. The CIA was not eager to involve itself in murder. It was bullied and badgered for a month by the civilian leader of the United States, the blue-eyed soldier of democracy, Dwight Eisenhower.

When the CIA did interest itself in murder toward the end of September of 1960, it concocted various wayward, thuggish, or outlandish plots that came to nothing. The American scheming failed.

So what did happen? In September, with the assistance of the United Nations authorities, local African politicians undertook a coup against the Lumumba government. With strong UN backing, a weak group of inept but fearful and venal politicians ousted Lumumba. With the UN's continued support, these men were initially able to stay in office. In October and November, Lumumba was under house arrest in his prime-ministerial residence. Indeed, that he was publicly unavailable was a critical reason why the CIA murderers could not get their hands on him.

At the end of November, Lumumba sneaked out of his prime minister's residence and tried to make it to the central Congo, where the major sources of his support were. Again with a little help from the UN, and with much more fevered assistance from the Belgians and the Americans, Lumumba was captured and jailed by his African adversaries. He was incarcerated from early December through mid-January 1961.

His local adversaries found this only a temporary expedient, as did their Belgian and American backers. The army could not be trusted to secure the jail, and the politicians were afraid that if they put Lumumba on trial or executed him, they and their own regime would not survive. With more pushing from the Belgians and the Americans, Lumumba's African enemies shipped him to the secessionist Katanga province. The Africans in Katanga had said they would kill him, and they did. He arrived at about 5 p.m. on 17 January and was tortured, shot, and dead before 10 p.m. Two Belgian law enforcement officers commanded the African firing squad that shot him.