



RAINBOW LOBBY ARCHIVES

The Sovereign National Conference, Kinshasa, Zaire, 1992

The Congo-Compton Connection

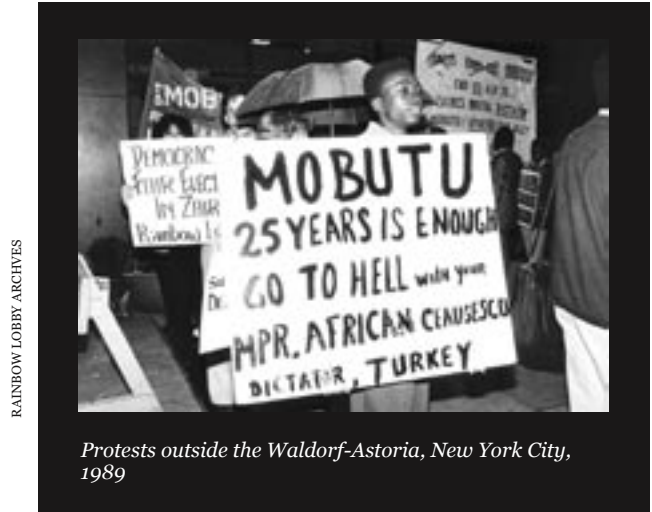
Deborah A. Green

The U.S. has officially committed itself to spreading democracy throughout the world. History will eventually reveal what consequences the Bush administration's nation-building experiment will have for the future of democracy in Iraq. But we can already see the consequences for American democracy. According to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center, foreign policy concerns have become a major factor in the presidential election for the first time since 1972.

In making a long-unchallenged foreign policy controversial, American independents introduced, however subtly, an element of doubt about the plausibility of future U.S. support for the dictatorship. And in that moment of doubt there was, for Congolese democrats under fire, a moment of opportunity.

The prospect of an indefinite engagement in Iraq, at tremendous cost in lives and resources, has inspired a passionate dialogue among Americans on the role our country should be playing in the world. And it has simultaneously exposed how shockingly inadequate American political institutions – in particular, the Democratic and Republican parties – are to the task of mediating that diverse dialogue.

For a poignant illustration of this institutional inadequacy, look no further than the *Boston Globe* poll of delegates to the Democratic National Convention last July: 80% of those polled said they opposed the decision to go to war against Iraq at the time it began, and 95% said they now oppose the war. As citizens, these Americans are against the war. As Democratic Party members, however, they nominated Senator John Kerry, who voted for the October 2002 war resolution.



Protests outside the Waldorf-Astoria, New York City, 1989

While the two major parties display tactical differences on domestic economic and social policy issues, they have shared, since the start of the Cold War, a remarkable consensus on most strategic issues, especially foreign policy. This consensus reflects the reality that the elites that control the two parties have strategic interests – in markets or oil, for instance – that are similarly aligned. The practical effect of this consensus is that it is impossible to change the strategic direction of our foreign policy without first dislodging major party control over policymaking.

Americans who believe the war was justified to liberate Iraqis from the dictator Saddam Hussein should be equally concerned about this bipartisan lock on policy. For there is good reason to question the quality of democracy dished out by the bipartisan foreign policy establishment to Iraqis. Can a bureaucratic elite that cares so little for the opinions of its own citizens teach Iraqis about democratic participation? When your corporate sponsors are reaping millions of dollars in reconstruction projects, can you be entrusted with “nation-building”?

Even some neo-conservatives, the architects of the war in Iraq, have begun to see the downside of a foreign policy that has legitimacy for neither the American people nor the Iraqis. Francis Fukuyama, in the Summer 2004 issue of *The National Interest*, describes the potential impact of such a policy: “The poorly executed nation-building strategy in Iraq will poison the well for future such exercises, undercutting domestic political support for a generous and visionary internationalism, just as Vietnam did.”¹

What is the track record of Democratic and Republican administrations on democratization and nation building? To begin to answer that question, it is useful to look at another of the world's disaster areas: the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). Since 1998, civil war and war-induced diseases and starvation have killed 3.3 million Congolese. The conflict and instability suffered by the country today can be blamed in large measure on the devastation wrought by the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, a Cold War ally of the United States. In exchange for stopping the spread of communism on the African continent, and preserving access to his country's wealth of strategic minerals for the United States, Mobutu enjoyed continuous support from both Democratic and Republican administrations for almost four decades. When the Cold War ended in 1989, the Congolese people organized a peaceful democracy movement; it produced a democratically elected transitional government that challenged Mobutu's vise-like grip on power. But instead of recognizing and assisting this new government, and taking firm measures to isolate Mobutu, presidents George Bush, Sr. and Bill Clinton intervened at key moments to sideline the most independent leadership and shore up Mobutu's waning influence.

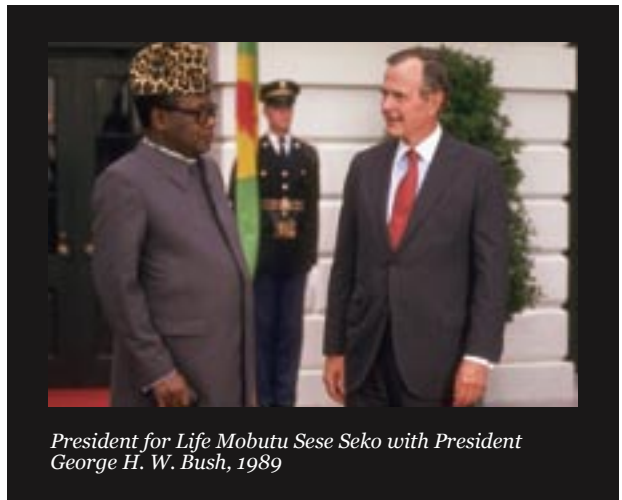
The example of the Congo is worth examining for another reason: although the Congolese democrats were marginalized and undermined by the U.S. government, and were ultimately defeated, they did not go down without generating a crisis in Mobutu's relationship with the bipartisan foreign policy establishment in Washington. They were able to do this because they were accompanied and assisted by *independent* organizations of American citizens, outside the sway of partisan attachment and influence.

From 1986 to 1994, three grassroots organizations – the U.S.-Congo Friendship Committee, the Rainbow Lobby, Inc., and Americans United with the Congolese People – along with African American independent leader Dr. Lenora Fulani, built a partnership with the Congolese democratic movement. In some respects, the three organizations resembled the many other “solidarity organizations” formed at the time to mobilize American support for various foreign policy goals – the struggle against apartheid in South Africa being the most well known example. The U.S.-Congo Friendship Committee connected exiled Congolese activists and American progressives, and raised hu-

manitarian assistance for the movement in Zaire. The Rainbow Lobby was a 50,000-member citizens lobby headquartered in Washington, DC that specialized in democracy issues at home and abroad, and became the lobbyist for the U.S.-based anti-Mobutu movement. Americans United with the Congolese People raised funds from thousands of individual Americans to support this lobbying effort.

But these independent organizations differed from other solidarity groups in this important respect: they neither sought nor found a home in the Democratic Party, the partisan alignment of choice for such groups. The anti-apartheid movement located itself within the Democratic Party and the array of non-governmental organizations – think tanks, foundations, etc. – that were associated with it financially and politically. Given the strong identification of the African American community with the struggle against the racist white regime in South Africa, it became almost de rigeur for Democratic politicians with black constituencies to embrace this cause as their own, and offer themselves up for arrest in civil disobedience actions at South Africa's Washington embassy. But taking on a *black* African dictator like Mobutu required a political vision that went beyond opportunistic ethnic politics.

PHOTO BY DIRCK HALSTEAD/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES



President for Life Mobutu Sese Seko with President George H. W. Bush, 1989

Mobutu and his U.S. lobbyists understood the racial dynamic of American politics, and knew how controversial it would be for a primarily “white liberal” organization like the Rainbow Lobby to target the black president of a sovereign African state. After the Rainbow Lobby's grassroots campaign convinced the black mayors of Washington, DC and Baltimore



Etienne Tshisekedi with Dr. Lenora Fulani and the author

to scuttle luncheons planned for him during his 1989 state visit, Mobutu stepped up his charm offensive toward the African American community. He invited the National Conference of Black Mayors to come to Zaire on an all expense-paid tour. He sent a Zairian state choir on a tour of African American churches. Fulani, backed up by the “white” Rainbow Lobby, stepped in to break up these “cultural exchanges,” earning a torrent of abuse from an assortment of Democrats (and the gratitude of the more thoughtful mayors and ministers, who were glad to avoid the embarrassment of being duped by a human rights abuser).

But the most bruising fight began in 1987, when an influential member of the House Subcommittee on Africa emerged as Mobutu’s chief advocate on Capitol Hill. While most of the Congressional Black Caucus agreed to co-sponsor the Rainbow Lobby’s bill cutting off aid to Mobutu, Rep. Mervyn Dymally (D-CA), the African American congressman from the Compton district of Los Angeles, refused. Then, when Rainbow Lobby executive director Nancy Ross arranged a congressional tour in 1987 for the leader of the Congolese democratic opposition, Etienne Tshisekedi, Dymally refused to meet with him.

Back in Zaire, in January of 1988 Tshisekedi was brutally attacked by Mobutu’s security forces while addressing a peaceful rally in the capital, Kinshasa. Two people were killed and dozens wounded in the incident, which occurred when Dymally himself was there. At the Rainbow Lobby’s initiative, 48 members of Congress wrote to Mobutu expressing their concern. Dymally, however, issued an alternative version of the event that denied the death and injury toll and justi-

fied Mobutu’s repression of the rally: Tshisekedi was demonstrating without a permit!

Why was Dymally sticking his neck out for Mobutu? A Rainbow Lobby probe uncovered a pattern of gifts and business opportunities awarded by Mobutu to Dymally’s personal associates. This research was picked up by reporters at the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Journal of Commerce*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*. For instance, Michele Fuetsch reported for the *LA Times* that:

Dymally split with his colleagues in the Congressional Black Caucus in 1987 and refused to support a move to cut U.S. aid to Mobutu, whose luxurious lifestyle – complete with palaces and private jets – stands in stark contrast to the impoverished existence of most Zairians.

Since the ’87 split, Dymally has become known as a leading Mobutu defender in Congress. The congressman has traveled in Africa at Zairian government expense, written a book about the African president and sits on the advisory board of an organization that received \$250,000 from Mobutu.²

The Rainbow Lobby’s challenge to a black Democratic congressman was profoundly unsettling to the community of Africa’s advocates in DC, even – and perhaps especially – to black congressmen who *had* come out against Mobutu. The Rainbow Lobby had violated the norms of Democratic Party politics. Dymally himself entered nine separate attacks on the Rainbow Lobby into the *Congressional Record*, accusing its leadership of being communists. Liberal publications that should have known better, from Washington’s *City Paper* to *The Nation* magazine, sided with Dymally and condemned Congo’s independent advocates.

But even as the controversy on Capitol Hill grew more and more inflamed, the Congolese held onto their connection to the Rainbow Lobby and declined to go with more traditional advocates. In a 1988 letter to Ross, Tshisekedi described how Congressman Dymally visited him while he was still Mobutu’s prisoner “to pressure me in the name of the Black Caucus to accept what he, with insistence, called ‘national reconciliation’ and which in Zaire means...joining the Popular Movement of the Revolution, Mobutu’s state party.”³

Tshisekedi resisted the Democrat's pressure; he chose instead to cement his relationship with independent forces. He wrote: "If that is the official policy of the Black Caucus, I ask you, my dear Nancy, to be my interpreter with the Honorable Members of Congress, so they would change this political vision."

When Dymally traveled to Kinshasa again in 1991, he was picketed by Congolese demonstrators at the U.S. Embassy, just as he was picketed by his own constituents back home in Compton. This tandem of Congolese and American protesters came to be known as the "Congo-Compton Connection."

The willingness of the Zairian opposition to stand by the Rainbow Lobby was absolutely critical to legitimizing the American independent campaign to change U.S. policy on Mobutu. Mervyn Dymally's fight was not just with the Rainbow Lobby, but with the "Congo-Compton Connection," a new social force operating in an enlarged political space – bounded neither by Mobutu's ability to brutalize the democracy movement nor by the Democratic Party's ability to marginalize it.

This new social force won some victories: Congress cut off aid to Mobutu in 1990, and in 1991 Dymally, by then the chairman of the Africa Subcommittee, allowed H.Con.Res. 238 calling on Mobutu to step down to pass through his committee without opposition. His change of heart was noted by Rep. Steven Solarz (D-NY), who stated for the record: "It surely could not have been easy

for the distinguished gentleman from California to bring to the floor a resolution calling for the resignation of a man whom he had gotten to know well over the years and whom he had seen on many occasions during the course of his frequent visits to Zaire..."⁴

In making a long unchallenged foreign policy controversial, American independents introduced, however subtly, an element of doubt about the plausibility of future U.S. support for the dictatorship. And in that moment of doubt there was, for Congolese democrats under fire, a moment of opportunity.

In 1991 the Congolese democracy movement convened a Sovereign National Conference, a remarkable assembly of 2,840 representatives from all political parties and social sectors in Zaire. The purpose of this conference was to draft a new constitution and design new, democratic institutions of governance for the post-Mobutu era. With this unexpected challenge to U.S. influence in Zaire, the Bush administration's commitment to Mobutu seemed stronger than ever. In testimony for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in November of 1991, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman Cohen, insisted that President Mobutu still "had a role to play in Zaire."

A street in Kinshasa



Conceding that Mobutu had “lost legitimacy to govern Zaire during the transition to democracy,” Cohen nevertheless insisted that Zaire’s best hope for the future was “genuine power-sharing” with the illegitimate ruler. While admitting that Mobutu could “no longer pay or consistently control his own military,” Cohen argued for a continued role for him in the new government because “if he left the scene, the unknown of what the military would do is something we would have to really worry about.”⁵

Other testimony presented at the hearing, including that submitted by the Rainbow Lobby, recited the horrors of the regime and concluded that “Mobutu must go” to prevent a full-fledged African crisis. Cohen, however, started from the premise that “Mobutu must stay,” and all the scenarios he evolved for his testimony seemed designed to rationalize this premise.

Even as the Congolese democrats and their American allies worked to enlarge the political space for democratic change, the bipartisan foreign policy establishment was preparing to cordon it off.

By August of 1992 the Sovereign National Conference was completing work on the institutions that would govern Zaire for a projected two-year transition pe-

riod leading up to elections. These included a parliament with an elected prime minister, and a national electoral commission. In spite of constant violent attacks by the dictator’s security forces, the Sovereign National Conference bravely relegated the “President” to a minor role in the transition, a role Mobutu and his entourage refused to accept. To break the impasse, the Bush administration brokered a “power-sharing” arrangement, which permitted Mobutu to remain president of the Republic during the transition period but required him to “collaborate” with the prime minister and the parliament in the key areas of defense and foreign affairs.

In practice, Mobutu maintained exclusive control over his 20,000-man Special Presidential Division – the only regularly paid and well-equipped element of the armed forces – and used them to paralyze the newly elected prime minister, Etienne Tshisekedi, and terrorize the population. In 1993, Americans United with the Congolese People helped fund a visit to the United States for Tshisekedi’s Minister of Communication, who presented these statistics to the United Nations: 9,000 lives lost and 500,000 people displaced as a result of Mobutu’s “ethnic cleansing” operations intended to undermine support for the new government.

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Lambert Mende Omalanga, Lenora B. Fulani, George Nzongola-Ntalaja, Nancy Ross, Etienne Tshisekedi, Deborah Green, Marthe Tshisekedi in Washington, DC, 1990

Congolese hopes were raised when Bill Clinton was elected president in November of 1992. During his campaign, Clinton had promised to put African dictators on notice that U.S. complaisance was a thing of the past. But like every U.S. president since John F. Kennedy, Clinton too would weigh in on the side of Mobutu. While issuing occasional criticism of Mobutu's murderous sabotage, the Clinton State Department refrained from implementing meaningful sanctions against him. Lobbyists for Americans United with the Congolese People succeeded in getting the House Africa Subcommittee to pass H.Res. 128, calling on the president to freeze Mobutu's assets, deny visas to his cronies, expel his ambassador, impose an arms embargo and raise the issue of Mobutu's violence in the United Nations Security Council, but the administration did not respond to these demands. Clinton did issue an Executive Proclamation on June 21, 1993, forbidding the issuance of visas to "persons who...impede Zaire's transition to democracy."⁶ But he rendered the order meaningless when he allowed Ngbanda Nzambo-Ko-Atumba, Mobutu's head of security (known as "the Terminator" on the streets of Kinshasa) into the country less than a month later.

Far from sanctioning Mobutu, Clinton's chief policy objective seemed to be to dislodge Prime Minister Tshisekedi – the Congolese people's choice. The Clinton administration never hid its preference for a "neutral" technocrat, insisting that someone without a political base of support was more suitable for leading the transitional government. Spokesmen for Tshisekedi bitterly complained of overt politicking by the U.S. Embassy on behalf of such a candidate – Leon Kengo wa Dondo, a former prime minister under Mobutu who was trusted by the IMF.

In June of 1994, the U.S. government got what it wanted in Zaire. The "technocrat" Kengo won an illegal election orchestrated by Mobutu and boycotted by the entire democratic opposition.

The "Congo-Compton Connection" had been effective in destabilizing the U.S. government's unqualified support for the dictator Mobutu. But it was not strong enough to force the United States to support democracy in Congo, nor to prevent it from denaturing the democratic institutions so painstakingly created by the Congolese themselves. Under the unpopular Kengo, those institutions devolved into instruments for the suppression of democracy, and Congo began its de-

scend into the tragic chaos that still prevails today.

By failing to legitimize and assist a non-violent democracy movement that enjoyed demonstrable support across diverse ethnic groups and constituencies, the U.S. government squandered a precious opportunity to promote democracy in the underdeveloped world. Both Democratic and Republican administrations viewed the democratic aspirations of the Congolese not as a hopeful sign of progress in one of the world's more ravaged places, but as a source of instability, and a threat to the continuity of existing economic and political relationships best left undisturbed. This history should dispel any illusion that either major party is willing to allow the future of a country as strategically important as Iraq to be decided by its own people.

But this history also suggests the potential for groups of political independents to have an impact on foreign policy. By enlarging the "political space" for dialogue and action, independents create a forum for citizens to debate the wisdom or decency of past policies, and propose new policies more responsive to the interests of ordinary people. More importantly, as they chip away at the paralyzing constraints of the two major parties, independents create an environment in which citizens can reignite the development of democracy itself. If Americans can accomplish this, we may then have something worthwhile to teach the world about democracy. ^{NEO}

Deborah Green was the political director of the Washington, DC-based Rainbow Lobby, Inc., which advocated on behalf of U.S. and international democracy causes on Capitol Hill between 1985 and 1992. She subsequently became a partner in Ross & Green, which represented Americans United with the Congolese People from 1993 to 1995.

Notes

- 1 Francis Fukuyama. "The Neo-Conservative Moment," *The National Interest*. Number 76, Summer 2004. pp. 57-68.
- 2 "Local Elections; 31st Congressional District; Dymally Criticized for Supporting Mobutu," *Los Angeles Times*. May 31, 1990. p. B-3.
- 3 Translated by D. Green.
- 4 "Regarding Democratic Changes and Violations of Human Rights in Zaire," *Congressional Record – House*. 102nd Congress, 1st Session. Vol. 137, No. 171. November 19, 1991.
- 5 United States Senate, Subcommittee on African Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations. Hearing on the Current Situation in Zaire. 102nd Congress, 1st Session. November 6, 1991.
- 6 *Public Papers of the President: William J. Clinton – 1993*. Vol. 1, p. 1294.