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Stuart A. Reid, *The Lumumba Plot: The Secret History of the CIA and a Cold War Assassination*, Knopf Press, 2023, 624 pp. $25.55 Hardcover

Solving a Cold (War) Case: The U.S Role in the Murder of Congolese Premier Patrice Lumumba

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Abstract. Perhaps the history of the Cold War offers "lessons" on how to create "situations of strength" in our current showdown with Russia and China, as Dr. Hal Brands, the Henry A. Kissinger chair at the School of Advanced International Studies, has recently argued.* But the lesson in Stuart A. Reid's disturbing and important new book, *The Lumumba Plot*, points to a very different conclusion: to win the Cold War in the Congo in the early 1960s, the U.S. resorted to a host of subversive expedients that included conspiring to murder a head of state. Regime change in the Congo eventually ushered in 32 years of bloody plunder by the CIA's handpicked strongman, Mobutu Sese Seko. It is worth understanding how this happened; why, as Reid terms it, "a moment of unprecedented hope gave way to unrelenting tragedy."
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Book review

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Lumumba the Mercurial

Among the virtues of *The Lumumba P*lot is its complete and nuanced portrait of the man the U.S. would one day target for elimination. The reader can only wonder if Lumumba, had he survived, could have saved his country from the killing field it subsequently became. We will, of course, never know.

Born in a small tribe called the Tetela in the center of the sprawling Belgian colony, the teenage Lumumba, after being kicked out of two

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Protestant mission schools for rebellious behavior, set off by foot with a bindle of clothes on his shoulder for the mining town Kalina. There, he worked briefly as a clerk before fleeing the town when it was discovered that he was stealing company goods and reselling them on the black market. He then found his way to the city of Stanleyville where he got a job as a postal clerk, throwing himself into civic associations organized by other Congolese "*evolués*" – those blacks whose facility in French but, above all, their fealty to their white patrons had earned them the envied classification as "evolved."

Reid describes the youthful Lumumba as "chameleonic" – seething in private with resentment at white abuse of blacks, but ever ready to advocate "docility" before his Belgian overlords when opportunity required it. After a session with the 29 year-old Lumumba, the white provincial governor described him as "undoubtedly the most striking personality among Stanleyville *evolués*." But once again Lumumba got into trouble, this time for embezzling money as a postal clerk. After serving a year in jail, the "ex-convict," as U.S classified cables would routinely characterize him later, made his way to the Congolese capital of Léopoldville. There he seized on yet another opportunity, becoming a beer salesman for a marginally-profitable brand named "Polar." Learning Lingala, the Congolese lingua franca, in record time, Lumumba, plying Leopoldville's bars night and day, not only turned Polar into the brand of choice over its rival with his fluent incantations, but also became an eloquent tribune of the impossible -- Congolese independence.

Reid ably charts the whirlwind in which the systematically underdeveloped colony hurtled toward freedom in the so-called Year of Africa. In his speech on independence day, June 30, 1960, the new Congolese premier skipped the usual bromides and instead launched into a searing diatribe about the "humiliating slavery" of Belgian colonial rule. Though livid about these remarks, the attending Belgian King Baudoin said nothing for he knew something that Lumumba didn't: Belgium had a Plan B.

The Belgian Gamble (*le pari belge*)

The metropole's plan was to transfer the trappings of power to the Congo while maintaining de facto control over the new state which, at the time of independence, did not have a single black in a senior position in its civil service or armed forces and fewer than 20 Congolese college graduates overall. The gamble, however, backfired. Rebelling against their white officers, Congolese soldiers began attacking whites, pillaging their property and raping women, some white. The Belgian government in Brussels responded by airlifting paratroopers into the Congo. At week's end, hundreds of Congolese had lost their lives and Belgium was actively abetting the secession of the mineral-rich Congolese province of Katanga. As Reid tells it, Premier Lumumba immediately made the first of several appeals to Washington for help in stabilizing the situation and evicting the Belgian military from his country.

The Eisenhower administration's initial response to the violent breakdown of order and Lumumba's plea for help was, ironically enough, just right. Rejecting the option of direct American military intervention, Washington called on the United Nations Security Council to authorize what would become the organization's largest peacekeeping operation in its history. As UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold worked out the

mission's administrative mandate (sending his seasoned American deputy, Ralph Bunche, to head the operation in the Congo), the U.S launched a massive airlift, ferrying in troop contingents from around the world into the strife-torn country. Although the Soviet role was marginal to begin with -- flying in food and two African contingents for the multinational operation -- Lumumba did trip some alarm bells in Washington by publicly asking Khrushchev to "watch hourly" over the situation.

In the summer of 1960, the Cold War was at its iciest. "The Congo affair on top of everything else," columnist I.F. Stone wrote, "gives the world the atmosphere on a barroom on the verge of a brawl." The U.S. had suffered a series of stunning setbacks abroad: the "loss" of Cuba, the expansion of the communist insurgency in Laos, the cancellation of the president's trip to Japan because of leftist riots, the shooting-down of the U.S. U-2 spy plane by the Russians, and the bitter confrontation between Eisenhower and Khrushchev at their summit meeting in Paris in May 1960.

But it wasn't the Russian threat that so obsessed official Washington in those first weeks so much as the widespread reports of the rape of white women in the Congo. These became "the continuing preoccupation" of the White House, as the State Department described it at the time. So seriously did President Eisenhower regard the assaults than the U.S. Ambassador to the Congo, Clare Timberlake, was called home to brief the chief executive personally about "verified cases" of rape along with evidence of the ambassador's dire allegation that Lumumba was a "drug addict."

It so happened that joining Timberlake on that C-130 flight to Washington was a shadowy figure hardly known in either Washington or Léopoldville. His name was Lawrence "Larry" Devlin, the newly-appointed, 38 year-old CIA Station Chief in the Congo. Reid portrays him as a charming and scheming man, one ever anxious to take matters into his own hands. Devlin would serve as the critical intermediary in Lumumba's murder and the intimate mentor of the slain premier's eventual successor, Joseph Mobutu (later renamed Mobutu Sese Seko).

But the sheer malignancy of what was about to happen would never have been possible had Lumumba not insisted on suddenly traveling to Washington in late July 1960. He fervently believed that if he could talk in person to Eisenhower, he could persuade the American president to help him push Belgian military forces out of the Congo. Advancing the Congolese premier's trip to the U.S., sadly enough, was Dr. Alexander Reid, the Methodist missionary who had baptized Lumumba twenty-three years earlier in his native village of Onalua.

The Decision to Kill Lumumba

Arriving 24 hours before Lumumba was to make his visit to D.C., Larry Devlin found CIA Director Allen Dulles urgently waiting at headquarters for a briefing on the crisis. Devlin proceeded to lay out a grandiose theory about why the Soviets wanted to control Lumumba; namely, to "use the Congo as a base to infiltrate and extend their influence over the nine countries or colonies" that bordered it. Once established, their power base could "outflank NATO in Western Europe" and appropriate the Congo's cobalt and other precious metals, allowing Russia to achieve technological supremacy over the United States.

Whatever Dulles thought of this abject fantasy, the director had already told the National Security Council that Lumumba's communist background was "harrowing." Reid, however, conclusively demonstrates that Lumumba's communist connections were at most incidental and opportunistic. In fact, no sooner had he moved into Blair House on his first day in Washington than Lumumba reiterated his call for American troops to be sent to the Congo. But no one was listening, least of all President Eisenhower who was traveling outside Washington. What followed was akin to the fable about the spider and the fly.

As UN Under Secretary-General Ralph Bunche observed, Lumumba was "tough, smart and agile" in his own milieu. But among powerful white leaders, he proved to be a credulous naif. Promised the sexual services of a white woman during his Washington visit by Larry Devlin (who had also told him he would get the gift of a machine gun), Lumumba tactlessly raised the issue when nothing was forthcoming: *"On m'a promis une blanche blonde"* (I was promised a blonde white woman), he told a shocked young Foreign Service Officer. When the hostess of Blair House heard about this, she raised a stink and let the White House know. As it turned out, Devlin's cruel little artifice had its desired effect, touching off indignation among the elderly white men who were about to discuss Lumumba's fate.

Given the cold shoulder in Washington, Lumumba then turned to the Russians, asking them to airlift trucks and armaments into the Congo. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev could hardly believe his luck. "Really, are the Americans that stupid?" he asked an aide, wondering why the U.S. had snubbed the Congolese premier. Two weeks later, Ilyushin transport planes – eleven in total – began landing in the Congo. From Leopoldville, Devlin flashed an emergency message to Washington: "Congo experiencing (a) classic Communist effort (to) takeover the government. There may be little time left (to) take action to avoid another Cuba."

At a hastily-called NSC meeting in Washington later that day, an angry Eisenhower said, "We were talking of one man forcing us out of the Congo, of Lumumba supported by the Soviets." It was then that the president made his fateful utterance. Reid describes it as follows: "Robert Johnson, the official note-taker for the meeting, noticed the president turn toward Dulles. Then, he recalled, 'President Eisenhower said something – I can no longer remember his words – that came across to me as an order for the assassination of Lumumba.'" There was fifteen seconds of stunned silence in the room.

At the very time Eisenhower was giving the order to murder him, Lumumba was addressing the Congolese people over the radio. "We know that the U.S. understands us," he said, "and we are pleased to see the U.S. position in bringing about international peace...If the Congolese people place their confidence in the U.S., which is a great friend, they will find themselves rewarded." Five days later, as CIA scientists were preparing a deadly poison to assassinate the man, Lumumba announced his intention to send 300 students to the U.S. for study.

The Assassination

In its shocking 1975 report, the U.S. Senate select committee under the chairmanship of Frank Church (D-Idaho) first detailed the plot to assassinate Lumumba but never answered the question: were U.S. officials involved in

his actual murder or just the conspiracy to do so? *The Lumumba Plot* gives us a definitive answer to that question with the precision and certainty of a coroner's report.

Larry Devlin's later claim (the first of two different ones as it turned out) was that after a month of trying to get the vial of toxic botulinum into something Lumumba ate or drank – and bringing in two completely inept European criminals to accomplish the murder – he went out to the bank of the Congo River and, in a sudden act of conscience, buried the poison in the dirt. Every form of evidence we have, however, suggests that this self-administered ablution is a canard.

When the poison plan stalled, for example, Devlin asked headquarters to pouch him a "high-powered, foreign make rifle with a telescopic sight and a silencer," observing, "Hunting good here when light's right." And what about the squad of marksmen the CIA chief had recruited and deployed near the residence where Lumumba was being held under house arrest? The declassified cable record also demonstrates that the CIA station knew in advance via an unnamed agent that Lumumba would try to escape his confinement: "station has several possible assets in event of breakout and studying several plans of action."

When Lumumba did escape on the night of November 27, 1960 in a tropical storm, slipping through two rings of soldiers, the CIA swung into action to capture him. Three days after the escape, a light reconnaissance plane hired by the Agency spotted Lumumba's small convoy of vehicles and alerted Mobutu's forces. At a river crossing, a detachment of ANC soldiers then arrested Lumumba and flew him back to the Congolese capital of Léopoldville. He was taken before now-Colonel Mobutu who, according to the Associated Press, "with folded arms, calmly watched the soldiers slap and abuse the prisoner."

But even in prison, Lumumba continued to pose a dire threat to Mobutu. By early January 1961, Devlin could report that Mobutu – the "Hamlet of the Congo," as Reid describes him--and the rest of the cabal on the CIA payroll were enveloped by "a spirit of defeat." Part of the reason for this was the election of Senator John F. Kennedy as president. It was widely rumored that the incoming administration, which now included the appointment of pro-African liberals like Michigan Governor G. Mennen Williams to leading diplomatic posts, would call for the release of all Congolese political prisoners. If that happened, Mobutu would clearly be on the chopping block, but so would Larry Devlin along with his massively funded CIA station.

A week before JFK was inaugurated, the CIA station chief cabled Director Dulles, requesting – practically demanding – millions of dollars of new clandestine funding: "Refusal to take drastic steps at this time will lead to defeat of (United States) policy in Congo." But Kennedy's transition team shelved the request.

At Camp Hardy, where Lumumba was imprisoned, soldiers mutinied, beating up and jailing their own officers and opening the Congolese premier's cell door to release him. But Lumumba refused to walk out, sensing it was a trap. For Devlin and Mobutu, the writing was now on the wall. It was now or never to give, what Reid calls, the "green light." Before sunrise on January 17, Lumumba and two of his supporters were hustled out of their cells and trucked to a plane originally bound for Bakwanga, Kasai but then rerouted to an equally lethal place – Katanga. On board the DC-4, three

ANC soldiers, all Baluba tribesmen, beat the three prisoners with unrelenting savagery, causing the Belgian radio operator at one point to vomit at the horrific sight.

After landing in Elisabethville, the Katangese provincial capital, the prisoners were taken to a bungalow where they were tortured for three hours. "I remember being struck by his dignity," one of the Belgian assailants later said about Lumumba. The captive men were then transported to the bush outside Elizabethville where they were machine-gunned to death and their bodies dumped into a shallow trench. Although the CIA station in Léopoldville soon learned about the executions, Devlin and company never informed Washington. A full four weeks later, UN officials in New York were able to confirm the murders.

"Track Two"

Asked how the Congo crisis compared to other national security challenges faced by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in the Third World, former Under Secretary of State George W. Ball, who served in that post from 1961 to 1966, responded, "the default to track two." He went on to explain, "When 'track one' – diplomacy, negotiation and bargaining – failed to produce expected results, we tended to shift to 'track two' where covert action and military solutions took precedence. The effect – in the Congo, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Alliance for Progress and elsewhere -- was self-fulfilling."*

During his time as the State Department's second-in-command, Ball, a Europeanist and multilateralist liberal who was an early opponent of military escalation in Vietnam, pushed back on the default to track two in the Congo. But, in the end, both he and President Kennedy failed in the effort. *The Lumumba Plot* does a dispositive job in explaining why.

After Lumumba's assassination (and the death of UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold later that year), the Kennedy administration sped down track one, shoring up the UN peacekeeping operation, pushing Belgium to disengage from the Congo, and working to bring about a government of national unity in Léopoldville. Reid accurately reports that, "Kennedy cleaned

*In interview with the author on March 11, 1978. I was then helping Ball organize his papers for his memoir, *The Past Has Another Pattern* (1982).

house." But this only pertained to the diplomatic track – namely, the appointment of a new U.S. ambassador to the Congo backed by liberal State Department leaders like Ball and former Connecticut governor Chester Bowles. Track two, however, remained untouched. When I asked Ball why, he said, "because JFK, while a fine diplomatist, was also an aficionado of the praetorian option" (i.e. track two). Larry Devlin accordingly was back in business to stop the Congo from going "communist."

At an all-parties conference to choose a new government, when the Lumumbists threatened to take over the regime-in-the-making, Devlin began ferrying suitcases full of cash through a sewage tunnel to change the vote among the supposedly-sequestered parliamentarians. The result was the election of a pro-American regime under labor leader Cyrille Adoula – "a real win" for the New Frontier, as JFK called it. The ever-guileful Devlin, however, wanted more; namely, millions of new dollars in payouts to Colonel Mobutu and his officers to convert the rabble known as the *Armée Nationale*

Congolaise (ANC) into a Wagner-like praetorian that would seize power if civilian regime ever faltered. When the Kennedy White House okayed the dispatch of the "silver bullets," the die was cast.

In the fall of 1962, President Kennedy, frustrated by the dysfunction of Adoula's government, Lumumbist insurrectionist stirrings as well as the inability of the UN to end Katanga's secession, turned to Under Secretary Ball, inviting him "to take a long, hard look" at disengaging from the Congo. Ball seized the chance to set the conditions for such a drawdown as follows: draft a new constitution that would make the Congo into a confederation, hopefully allowing its disparate tribes and leaders (including the Lumumbists) to coexist; "clean house" in Léopoldville by removing Devlin and Kennedy's personally-appointed ambassador, Ed Gullion, both behaving, in Ball's view, "like bloody pro-consuls"; reinforce UN and American mediation, to "play it straight" and allow the Congolese to figure out their own destiny for a change.

But history intervened. As JFK was considering the merits of Ball's recommendation, the CIA sent word that there were Russian nuclear missiles secretly being emplaced in in Cuba. Ball's Congo demarche was accordingly abandoned.

In 1963, the UN mission in the Congo succeeded in defeating the Katangese succession but regime disorder continued in Léopoldville. Even if the U.S. knew that the millions being paid out to Mobutu to sustain his impoverished troops were instead going to the general's numbered Swiss bank account, he got an invitation anyway to see President Kennedy.

Once in the Oval Office, Mobutu lost no time in communicating his wishes to the president: he personally wanted parachute training at Fort Benning and enrollment in a Green Beret course at Fort Bragg. This time, there was no mention of the need for a prostitute or a machine gun, but rather the gift of a command aircraft from the president who, though surprised by the request, soon acceded to it. "General, if it hadn't been for you," JFK said, "the communists would have taken over." With this benediction, track two was now in place.

When a rebellion swept the Congo the following year – complete with massacres of prisoners, reported flesh-eating by Lumumba-inspired tribesmen, and the taking of hundreds of American and Belgian hostages in Stanleyville – Mobutu and his ANC could do nothing. Instead, the CIA put together a motley rescue operation, combining South African mercenaries, anti-Castro Cuban fighter pilots, and Belgian paratroopers to liberate the hostages. All told, 100,000 Congolese were killed in the fighting. In 1965, with the monetary and operational support of the CIA, the 35 year-old Mobutu seized power in a coup d'état.

As we head into another "long twilight struggle," as Professor Brands describes it, we might want to understand just why American foreign policy has so often defaulted to track two even when the strategic stakes are as minimal as they were in the Congo. The evidence set forth in Stuart Reid's exceptional book points to a lethal alloy of ignorance and arrogance, one that turned Lumumba into "a disposable body long before his murder in the Katangan countryside."