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**Eddie Michel. "The Luster of Chrome: Nixon, Rhodesia, and the Defiance of UN Sanctions."** *Diplomatic History* 42:1 (January 2018): 138-161. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhx047>.

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Review by **Carl P. Watts**, Baker College, Michigan, and the University of Southampton

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**E**ddie Michel has written an article about a U.S. president who is prone to disparaging Africa and Africans, indifferent to international and domestic pressure for the United States to help uphold liberal democratic norms, dismissive of the precepts of international law, and who seeks to put America first by promoting the interests of U.S. corporations. Michel's article on President Richard Nixon and the defiance of international sanctions against Rhodesia therefore reminds us that there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to presidential attitudes and U.S. policy towards Africa.

Michel's article is to be welcomed not least because the general literature on the Nixon administration and Nixon's foreign policies affords scant attention to Africa.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, historians are in no doubt that African affairs were an extremely low priority during Nixon's presidency. In March 1970 Nixon made it clear that he did not want Africa intruding on his time or that of his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, because African issues would not "have any significant effect on the success of our foreign policy in the foreseeable future."<sup>2</sup> Nixon's contempt for Africa was revealed by his suggestion to Kissinger that African policy should be left in the hands of Secretary of State William Rogers: "Henry, let's leave the niggers to Bill and we'll take

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), has just one index entry for Africa; Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston (eds.), *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) has only a dozen brief references to Africa scattered throughout the text.

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum from President Nixon to the President's Assistants (Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Kissinger), 2 Mar. 1970, in Joseph Hiltz and David C. Humphrey (eds.), *Foreign Relations of the United States [hereafter FRUS], 1969-1976, Volume E-5, Part 1, Documents on Sub-Saharan Africa, 1969-1972* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, Department of State, 2005), doc. 10, available at: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d10>

care of the rest of the world.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, African problems did contrive to find their way to the president’s desk and in November 1971 Nixon endorsed the Byrd Amendment to the Military Procurement Act, lifting the ban on importing Rhodesian chrome. A variety of explanations have been offered for this decision, including the reshaping of African policy in the National Security Council (NSC), the role of corporate lobbyists, sympathy towards and support for the illegal regime among many members of Congress, and the apparent indifference of Nixon and Kissinger.<sup>4</sup> Michel argues that the decision to place the United States in violation of international sanctions against Rhodesia can be best understood in geostrategic and economic terms, which “truly reflected the White House’s core beliefs regarding international politics” (138).

Michel deftly summarizes the historiography of U.S. relations with Africa, and the Third World more broadly, during the 1960s and 1970s (139-141). Strategic approaches focus on the containment of Communism in the peripheral theaters of the Cold War, and explore the anti-communist rhetoric of white minority regimes, which they emphasized in order to appeal to the U.S. for political and material support. Economic approaches analyze the interests of U.S. corporations in maintaining access to the vast mineral wealth of Africa, and the ideological contest between free-market capitalism and state-centric economic planning. Michel frames the latter in terms of the Soviet example (140), but in the Third World during the 1960s the Chinese model of development was obviously highly significant, at least until the Cultural Revolution induced greater insularity.<sup>5</sup> He notes that the historiography of human rights has been especially important in framing analysis of President Jimmy Carter’s foreign policies (140), but this offers little utility for understanding Nixon’s policies, except as a moral critique. Finally, Michel surveys some of the literature that has analyzed U.S. engagement with Africa from the perspective of race. He contends that this approach has perhaps been somewhat over-emphasized, creating a “restricted lens” that “almost inevitably colors the interpretation of the source base.” (141) This claim gives pause for thought to any historian who has worked on U.S. relations with Africa during the Cold War. However, it may be argued that the racial prism remains essential because, as Nancy Mitchell recently put it, “the essence of American foreign policy during the Cold War – stopping Soviet expansion – slammed up against the most raw and explosive aspect of American domestic politics: racism.”<sup>6</sup> In any event, Michel is not suggesting that there is an either/or binary at play here, but rather that there is a need “to consider the diverse range of factors that influenced foreign policy during the Sixties and Seventies.” (141)

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 111; and Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 234.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew DeRoche, *Black, White, and Chrome: The United States and Zimbabwe, 1953-1998* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001), 171.

<sup>5</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 162-165. Recent studies of the historical and contemporary relationship between China and Africa include: Deborah Brautigam, *The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Zhangchi Cheng and Ian Taylor, *China’s Aid to Africa: Does Friendship Really Matter?* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Mitchell, *Jimmy Carter in Africa: Race and the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2016), 11.

By way of background to his main focus on the Nixon administration, Michel provides a concise and helpful summary of U.S. involvement in the international developments that followed Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in November 1965. He cites many of the primary sources from the UK National Archives, and the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, which have been used extensively in prior studies of the Johnson administration's policy on Rhodesia's UDI.<sup>7</sup> The Johnson administration had essentially steered a difficult middle course, supporting the United Kingdom as the responsible constitutional authority in Rhodesia, complying with mandatory UN sanctions against the illegal regime in Salisbury, helping Zambia to cope with the impact of sanctions on its own economy, sympathizing with the demands of African nationalists for immediate majority rule in Rhodesia, but rejecting calls for the use of force to terminate the UDI regime, or the use of broader sanctions against Rhodesia's regional partners, South Africa and Portugal. Michel's assessment that the Johnson administration's approach was "cautious and measured" (145) is consistent with the conclusions of previous studies.

The advent of the Nixon administration produced a shift in policy that subsequently came to be known as the "tar baby" option.<sup>8</sup> Michel prefaces his analysis of the process leading up to the Byrd Amendment by examining the conceptual basis for Nixon's foreign policy, as shaped by Kissinger. Although Africa was a low priority, developments on the continent still had to be taken into account because it had the potential to "complicate the broader geopolitical mission either by affecting domestic opinion or inviting communist expansion" (145). The Nixon Doctrine was predicated on the assumption that the best way to counter Communist expansion on the global periphery was to provide aid to friendly governments, even if they included unpalatable regimes like those in southern Africa. This strategic concept was reinforced by concerns about access to vital natural resources in the region, especially chrome, which was essential to a wide range of industries in the United States. Before UDI Rhodesia had been a major supplier of high quality chromite ore, but U.S. compliance with UN sanctions had produced a perverse reliance on imports from the Soviet Union (145-146). This gave the administration, and Rhodesian sympathizers in Congress, a powerful strategic logic for articulating a change of policy.

The strategic and economic case for a new direction was reinforced by racial attitudes within the Nixon administration and Congress. Michel acknowledges that Nixon and Kissinger demonstrated "cultural prejudices when formulating policy on Africa" (146). By way of illustration he notes that Nixon frequently snubbed African leaders like Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia.<sup>9</sup> An especially egregious example of racism – of which there was no shortage in the Nixon White House – was the occasion in September 1971, when Nixon laughed at Kissinger's reference to the African delegation of Mauritanian President Moktar Ould Daddah as "savages" (146). Michel also observes that Nixon "held close ties with southern political figures who supported Rhodesia on racial grounds." (138) Nixon benefitted from his "Southern Strategy," through which

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<sup>7</sup> See in particular, DeRoche, *Black, White, and Chrome*, Ch. 4 and 5; and Carl P. Watts, *Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence: An International History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), Ch. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Lake, *The "Tar Baby" Option: American Policy Toward Southern Rhodesia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> Scholars now have the benefit of a full study in Andrew DeRoche, *Kenneth Kaunda, the United States, and Southern Africa* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016). See also the H-Diplo Roundtable Review Volume XVIII, No. 32 (2017), available at: [https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/roundtable-xviii-32\\_0.pdf](https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/roundtable-xviii-32_0.pdf)

he appealed to southern white voters, and obtained support from southern Democrats like Mississippi Senator James Eastland, by distancing himself from enforcement of civil rights. Michel highlights the parallels between the domestic issue of civil rights and policy towards southern Africa, which have been explored extensively in the historiography dealing with the intersection of race, domestic politics, and the Cold War in Africa (145-146).

It was against this background that Kissinger sought to reshape policy towards southern Africa through the NSC (148-151). In April 1969 National Security Study Memorandum Number 39 (NSSM 39) called for a study to establish a range of African policy alternatives for the Nixon administration.<sup>10</sup> In response, the NSC Interdepartmental Group for Africa laid out six options, ranging from normalization of relations with the white regimes, through to increased bilateral and international coercion to induce constructive change in white-regime race policies.<sup>11</sup> Michel demonstrates that option two in NSSM 39 – the maintenance of public opposition to racial repression while simultaneously relaxing restrictions on political and economic engagement with the “White Redoubt” – had the greatest bureaucratic appeal. (150-151) At an NSC meeting in December 1969 Nixon was explicit that the United States had to be realistic, that the whites in Africa were there to stay, and more trade and investment should be permitted in South Africa and Rhodesia.<sup>12</sup> The documentary record supports Michel’s emphasis on the strategic and economic rationale for the change in U.S. policy towards southern Africa, which was brought into effect by National Security Decision Memorandum 38 on 28 January 1970. (151) The shift in policy was not announced publicly and was disseminated within the government on a “need to know” basis so as to blunt domestic criticism. (152)

Michel provides a detailed discussion of the passage of the Byrd Amendment based on extensive use of archival sources in the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Congressional records (152-158). This does not bring into question the established historiographical consensus, i.e. the process was not driven by the White House – which recognized the political costs involved in taking a lead on the issue, and was bogged down with other concerns (especially Vietnam) – but rather by Rhodesian sympathizers in Congress, acting in concert with lobbyists on behalf of U.S. corporations such as Union Carbide and Foote Mineral. Probably the most interesting aspect of the Byrd Amendment is something not discussed in Michel’s article – or, indeed, elsewhere in recent historiography – namely the “near silence of foreign governments.”<sup>13</sup> Another, related, point of interest is the effectiveness of Rhodesian quasi-diplomacy through the activities of the Rhodesian

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<sup>10</sup> National Security Study Memorandum 39, 10 Apr. 1969, in Myra F. Burton (ed), *FRUS, 1969-1976: Vol. XXVIII, Southern Africa* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, Department of State, 2011), doc. 6, available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v28/d6> See also Mohamed A. El-Khawas and Barry Cohen (eds) *The Kissinger Study of Southern Africa: National Security Study Memorandum 39* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1976).

<sup>11</sup> Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Interdepartmental Group for Africa, 9 Dec. 1969, in Burton (ed.), *FRUS, 1969-1976: Vol. XXVIII*, doc. 17, available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v28/d17>

<sup>12</sup> Minutes of a National Security Meeting, 17 Dec. 1969, in Burton (ed), *FRUS, 1969-1976: Vol. XXVIII*, doc. 20, available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v28/d20>

<sup>13</sup> Lake, *The “Tar Baby” Option*, 236-237.

Information Office in Washington DC, which Michel does mention briefly (148, 157, 158). Clearly there is some scope for additional research here.

Michel's article is of course primarily a study in U.S. decision-making but there is an extensive secondary literature on economic sanctions that is worth considering for reasons of context. Most scholars have treated the embargo against Rhodesia as a test case of the "instrumental value" of economic sanctions.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, it has been argued that sanctions failed because they were insufficient on their own to produce regime change in Rhodesia, and were perhaps even counterproductive because their effects hardened the attitudes of the white minority regime and its supporters. On the other hand, it has been argued that in the long term economic sanctions eroded the capacity of the Rhodesian government to resist the escalating African nationalist armed struggle, and in the short term dissipated Afro-Asian demands for British or UN military intervention to overthrow the illegal regime in Salisbury. As one Australian official put it shortly after UDI, ministers in Canberra were prepared "to go along with even only a partly effective oil embargo if they assessed this as [the] only means of forestalling renewed African pressure for military intervention."<sup>15</sup> At the time of Kissinger's policy review, the NSC Interdepartmental Group for Africa came to the conclusion that there was a tendency to overestimate the effectiveness of sanctions, which had been weakened by loopholes (South African and Portuguese connivance), and a concomitant tendency to "underestimate the extent to which criticism, both political and economic, would multiply with the passage of time and evidence of the program's lack of success."<sup>16</sup>

However, these debates about whether sanctions "worked" do not acknowledge that sanctions serve other purposes, in both the international and the domestic arenas. In the international sphere, sanctions have been used to signal when actors are in breach of global norms. Even very early analysis of Rhodesian sanctions recognized the significance of this: "when doing nothing is seen as tantamount to complicity, then *something has to be done to express morality*, something that at least serves as a clear signal to everyone that what the receiving nation has done is disapproved of."<sup>17</sup> Clearly, Nixon did not care to send such signals to the international community, even though he was well aware of the moral dimension.<sup>18</sup> In November 1971 the

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<sup>14</sup> For a summary see Andrew Cohen, "Lonrho and Oil Sanctions Against Rhodesia in the 1960s," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 37:4 (2011), 716-717; and Christopher R. W. Dietrich, "'The Sustenance of Salisbury' in the era of Decolonization: The Portuguese Politics of Neutrality and the Rhodesian Oil Embargo, 1965-7," *The International History Review* 35:2 (2013), 236, 252, n.5.

<sup>15</sup> Australian High Commission, London, to Department of External Affairs, Canberra, Cable No. 10527, 22 Nov. 1965, A1838, 190/11/1 Part 5, National Archives of Australia; quoted in Watts, *Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence*, 196.

<sup>16</sup> Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Interdepartmental Group for Africa, 9 Dec. 1969, in Burton (ed), *FRUS, 1969-1976: Vol. XXVIII*, doc. 17, Part II, "Present Policy," Southern Rhodesia.

<sup>17</sup> Johan Galtung, "On the Effects of International Economic Sanctions: With Examples from the Case of Rhodesia," *World Politics* 19:3 (1967), 411-412. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>18</sup> Minutes of a National Security Meeting, 17 Dec. 1969, in Burton (ed), *FRUS, 1969-1976: Vol. XXVIII*, doc. 20, opening remarks by the president.

UN General Assembly called upon the United States to comply with mandatory sanctions against Rhodesia.<sup>19</sup> Nixon reacted angrily and suggested that Kissinger should telephone the British Prime Minister, Edward Heath, to tell him that the White House was “taking a hard line” on Rhodesian chrome. Nixon told Kissinger to indicate that the United States would back whatever deal the British government wished to make with the Rhodesian Front regime, which would allow the U.S. government to “tell those goddamn Africans to go to hell.”<sup>20</sup>

Sanctions also often serve domestic political purposes “that can overshadow the efforts to change the behavior of foreign states.”<sup>21</sup> Certainly it can be argued that U.S. sanctions against Rhodesia were very important for the Johnson administration because they helped to blunt criticism that the United States was not doing enough to confront the ‘White Redoubt’ in southern Africa. Johnson and his senior officials were particularly concerned to prevent the issue of white minority rule from becoming a vehicle for the emergence of a separate African American voice in U.S. foreign policy.<sup>22</sup> For the Nixon administration, however, the domestic political circumstances were somewhat different. As Michel comments, civil rights groups and liberals were “horrified that the United States would be doing business with the white-controlled regime, but they possessed almost no influence over the White House” (158). Domestic pressure to disengage from southern Africa and to maintain sanctions against Rhodesia was limited. The Congressional Black Caucus was not founded until March 1971, and for the most part it focused on domestic rather than foreign policy issues (its Chairman, Charles C. Diggs of Michigan, was a notable exception). Further, U.S. interest groups that supported African liberation movements were small and ineffective and it was not until the presidency of Jimmy Carter that they became more influential.<sup>23</sup> This afforded Nixon and Kissinger some latitude in their policies. As Nixon put it: “You don’t gain any votes from the blacks who give a shit what happens to

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<sup>19</sup> General Assembly Resolution 2765, 16 Nov. 1971.

<sup>20</sup> Conversation Among President Nixon, the White House Chief of Staff (Haldeman) and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 18 Nov. 1971, in Burton (ed.), *FRUS, 1969-1976: Vol. XXVIII*, doc. 62, available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v28/d62>

<sup>21</sup> Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Jeffery J. Schott, and Kimberly Ann Elliot, *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered: History and Current Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of International Economics, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 2009), 6. For a general analysis of the U.S. domestic context see Alfred Cooper Drury, *Economic Sanctions and Presidential Decisions: Models of Rationality* (New York: Palgrave, 2005). For an empirical evaluation of the domestic politics thesis see Taehee Wang, “Playing to the Home Crowd? Symbolic Use of Economic Sanctions in the United States,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55: 3 (2011), 787-801.

<sup>22</sup> Carl P. Watts, “African Americans and U.S. Foreign Policy: The American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa and the Rhodesian Crisis,” in Helen Laville and Andrew Johnstone (eds.), *The U.S. Public and American Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2010), 108.

<sup>23</sup> Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 234; Lake, *The “Tar Baby” Option*, 231-236; Eric C. Morgan, “Our Own Interests: Nixon, South Africa, and Dissent at Home and Abroad,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 17:3, 489-490.

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Zambia.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, as Michel concludes, for the Nixon administration the geostrategic and economic rationale for flouting international sanctions “trumped the domestic and international ramifications of doing business with the practitioners of white minority rule” (160).

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<sup>24</sup> Conversation Between President Nixon and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 6 Oct. 1971, in Burton (ed.), *FRUS, 1969-1976: Vol. XXVIII*, doc. 59, available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v28/d59>