Beyond the New Deal

Anticolonialism, Peace in Europe, or Neutrality?
America’s Reactions to Mussolini’s Invasion of Ethiopia

Annick Cizel
Mussolini has begun the conquest of Abyssinia [...] the Wilhelmstrasse is delighted. Either Mussolini will stumble and get himself so heavily involved in Africa that he will be greatly weakened in Europe, whereupon Hitler can seize Austria, hitherto protected by Il Duce, or he will win, defying France and Britain, and thereupon be ripe for a tie-up with Hitler against the western Democracies. Either way, Hitler wins (Shirer 43).

1 A sovereign enclave bridging the Dark Continent and the Middle East still largely under European colonial rule, the kingdom of Abyssinia, renowned for its defeat of the Italians at Adowa in 1896, watched over the southern shores of the Red Sea below Suez, facing Yemen. Unscathed by the earlier « Scramble for Africa » and World War I carving of the continent that left Italy in Libya, Eritrea and (southern) ‘Somalia’; Great Britain in Egypt, the Sudan and (northern) British Somaliland; and France in Djibouti, Addis Ababa had long sought international status. « Opening the door » to Theodore Roosevelt’s commercial ventures as early as 1903, it signed a reciprocal trade agreement with Woodrow Wilson in 1914, and joined the League of Nations in 1923 before adhering to the Briand-Kellogg Pact—the Treaty for the Renunciation of War—five years later. However, by 1930 and Haile Selassie’s coronation as King of Kings, Sheba’s mythical Ethiopia had known little else but isolation and a medieval lack of development, and its fame hardly went beyond faint religious and Pan-African echoes in the West Indies, South Africa, and possibly northern urban Black America.

2 Wilsonian influence had placed self-determination for all peoples at the heart of international principles for world peace, and unintentionally shaped Ethiopian exceptionalism into a prophetic model for Black sovereignty to come. Mussolini’s 1934
war preparations for the vengeful subjugation of Ethiopia thus constituted an a-historical case of colonization at a time when Egypt or India, for instance, were being granted partial self-government from London; it also added unilateral militarism to the interwar Anglo-Italian imperialist competition in and around the Abyssinian empire. A sinister prelude to the rising global tensions in the wake of German rearmament and joint withdrawal with Japan from international forums, the Abyssinian campaign of 1935-36 soon became a test case for world peace, for the ‘raison d’être’ of the League of Nations and Kellogg Pact, as well as for American policy toward Europe and her colonial empires.

The necessity to preserve the now shaky balance between world powers while being true to the Wilsonian heritage of concerted international action and the democratic imperative of basing foreign policy on domestic consent (Schlesinger, 9) proved hard to reconcile for the new Democratic administration, whose multitudinous New Deal home recovery programs depended on an ethnic coalition now threatened by international divisions. Non-membership in the League and the historical Monroe Doctrine entailed neutrality as a matter of principle, as the Roosevelt administration was reminded by an essentially isolationist Congress, while the executive’s pragmatic belief that free commercial intercourse among nations was a prerequisite to world peace and economic recovery called for mediation and subsequent interference in the affairs of Europe. Neutrality therefore could hardly amount to disinterest and neglect, and the Abyssinian crisis came out as a testing ground for President Roosevelt’s Democratic team’s foreign policy, which between the December 5, 1934 early Italian encroachment into Ethiopia’s Ogaden province and May 9, 1936 proclamation of the Italian Empire, oscillated between moral world leadership and historical non-entanglement outside the American hemisphere, declared its dedication to ‘Good Neighbor’ behavior yet fell prey to European colonial strategic interests, while having to mediate between increasingly internationally conscious minority actors of foreign policy, in both the national and international arenas.

Condemnation Without Intervention: An Active Blend of Isolationism and Wilsonian ‘Moral Diplomacy’

The successive neutrality laws passed by the United States Congress between 1935 and 1941 have led to a common belief that « whatever the Administration or the public might have wished, America could not avoid playing a secondary role to the European powers in the Italo-Ethiopian crisis » (Henze, 53). Indeed, ambassador diplomacy relied on an essentially European network for information gathering—Britain and Italy for the most part, France and Switzerland, more rarely the Netherlands, Romania or Norway—even if US efforts were at all times frenzied to keep channels of communication open with the Ethiopian mainland. Referring since the fall of 1934 directly to President Roosevelt or to Secretary of State Hull, Ambassador Long in Italy would confer personally with Mussolini, and his colleague Wilson in Switzerland with Edvard Benes or Anthony Eden, then keep the executive daily informed of war developments. Likewise it appears that the State Department at once undertook « a study of neutral rights with a view to recommending to the President legislation redefining the attitude to be adopted by the United States in the event of war » (Adams, 220). For all this apprehensive agitation however, Cordell Hull maintained in late 1934 that US status was to be limited to that of an « observer » (FRUS 1934, 772), and by early 1936 hardly admitted going beyond « watchful waiting » (FRUS 1936, 197). Concurrently, in the wake of the first Somalia border clash at Wal Wal between Italian and Ethiopian troops, the US chargé was commanded to « keep the [State] Department fully informed of developments and scrupulously refrain from taking any
action which would encourage the Ethiopian Government to request the mediation of the United States » (FRUS 1934, 770).

Other witnesses of US diplomacy, however, described the US attitude differently, in their respective attempts to pay tribute to FDR’s faith in Wilsonian « moral diplomacy », refute absence of diplomatic influence, and condemn the wobbliness of the administration, forever hostage to its isolationist public opinion and Congress: the Council on Foreign Relations director Allen W. Dulles thus characterized Roosevelt’s sympathy for Ethiopia as « benevolent neutrality » (Dulles, 576), US Ambassador to Italy Breckinridge Long renamed it « non-intercourse with belligerents » (FRUS 1935, 826), while FDR’s economic adviser Herbert Feis’ « sympathetic evasion » substituted « verbal formulas » for thoughtful policies that were « independently conceived », and « designed solely to keep the United States out of war » (Feis, 91, 95). Omnipresent in diplomatic exchanges, the United States rather appears as a world policeman in absentia, whose potential intervention nonetheless acted as a deterrent on Mussolini: as the Chargé in France reminded the Secretary of State in August 1935, « in casting about for possible support, either moral or material, Mussolini was always relying on the hope that the United States would remain at least indifferent or disinterested » (FRUS 1935, 736). As relayed by the US Chargé in Italy to the Department of State in October 1935, the American giant was domestically restrained to exert only « sympathetic interest in the League’s efforts », with its higher authority resting solely in its global « moral influence » (FRUS 1935, 776).

Thus did inaction ironically develop into active diplomacy: « [The American reply] pointed out that the United States Government had taken action in advance of other Governments, which ‘represents the independent and affirmative policy of the Government of the United States ». In the lofty missionary vein of Wilsonian ‘moral diplomacy’, « the United States Government would use its moral influence in favour of peace » (Adams, 224). This uncommitted form of diplomacy might even prove more successful in diffusing world war threats than Europe’s mounting military preparations: « Incidentally, it is mentioned, in connection with American policy, that the line you [FDR] are understood to favor may serve to bring the Germans out in the open air so their real attitude will become clear, » in the words of a flattering US emissary in the final days of 1935 (FDR & FA, III, 106).

The latter report by the US Ambassador to Peru, Fred Morris Dearing, alarmingly reminded diplomatic circles of the Zimmerman Note of two decades earlier: « The Italians continue to spread their propaganda and it is having its effect, » as relayed by « the power of the Italian Bank, the Italian character of the church, the numerous Italian colony, the wide ramifications of Italian business within the country, and above all, Latin and racial sympathies. » In conclusion, there was no doubt that « opinion in general [was] veering towards Italy » (FDR & FA, III, 106). Echoes could be heard in several Latin American embassies, as Argentina and Brazil hesitated to apply League sanctions against Italy and Ecuador cancelled them in the spring of 1936, while the Italian representative at Geneva « called on a number of Latin American delegations […] suggesting that the Latin American League States adopt a common front in Geneva advocating the lifting of sanctions against Italy. » While Mexico alone « urged a reenforcement of sanctions against Italy » (FRUS 1935, 850), Chile shielded itself behind a Monroe doctrine rationale: « …the constitution or the procedures of the League must be shortly revised so as to exclude the participation of Latin American League members in non-American questions and of non-American League members in American questions. […] Failing such action
Chile will consider withdrawing from active participation in the League» (FRUS 1936, 117). Would Italy’s expansionist campaign be contained in Africa if « granted a free hand » there to preserve the status quo in Central Europe, specialists of Near-Eastern Affairs wondered (FRUS 1934, 769). What if « some European power were to seek, by force of arms, a raw material source in South America »? The Monroe doctrine lay at the core of Roosevelt’s Abyssinian policy, as explained to the Ambassador to Germany in December 1935: « We should have to take sides and might, without going to war ourselves, assist the South American nations with supplies of one kind or another4 » (FDR & FA, III, 102).

Military neutrality and non-entanglement in the affairs of Europe thus did not preclude other forms of intervention, and were held high only as long as Europe did not harm American interests. At the onset of the war, at a time when the USA drilled 40% of the world's oil wells, the Ethiopian Imperial Government secretly granted the African Development and Exploration Corporation of Delaware, a British-run subsidiary of the Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey, a 75-year concession in the Ogaden desert, bordering Italian Somalia (Adams, 216-17; Duprey, 389-90). For the Ethiopians, the goal of the 'Rickett concession' was twofold: besides the expected increase in foreign earnings, its strategic location made it a buffer zone between the westward-bound Italian armies and the Ethiopian capital city. The presence of American engineers there especially would have made it imperative for Washington to step in. Leaks in press reports infuriated Cordell Hull, who ordered the Standard Oil out while Roosevelt pronounced the ‘dollar diplomacy’ dead, and reiterated his wish to be « helpful to the cause of peace », rather than « helpful to Ethiopia », as the original dispatch ran (FDR & FA, III, 103-104; FRUS 1935, 778-84). By 1943 however, World War II made oil scarcer, and British stabilization of the region finally made possible the reactivation of the aborted oil deal of 1935 (Spencer, 106 n.2, 146, 165).

With another world war looming in the distance, the Roosevelt administration chose to depart from strict neutrality in one field, that of telecommunications, and repeatedly debated with British authorities the possibility of stationing a special « war vessel in nearby waters », off Aden, in a frantic wish to « maintain direct communication between the station at Addis Ababa and the naval stations at Washington and Cavite, Philippine Islands. [...] The Navy was contemplating asking the Radio Corporation of America to make arrangements with the Radio Orient at Beirut to relay messages to and from Addis Ababa » (FRUS 1935, 890). Indeed, as soon as Eritrea was secured by British forces in 1942, Washington initiated negotiations over 'Radio Marina', sheltered from magnetic storms by its geographical location in a zone « where the limited seasonal variations between sunrise and sunset reduced the need for numerous frequency changes », a strategic move which mirrored US policy in Abyssinia in 1935-36, and ever since; as John Spencer remembers it, Radio Marina, indeed, « had little to do with either Ethiopia or Africa » (Spencer, 262).

On the face of it though, and with much publicity both at home and abroad, neutrality expressed itself in recurrent American refusals to act as a mediator in the Italo-Ethiopian conflict. Addis took the lead in requesting American arbitration, first in mid-December 1934, then on July 3, 1935 in the name of the Kellogg Pact, and again by mid-September (FRUS 1934, 769-70; Gantenbein, 133; FRUS 1935, 751)5. While the Italian press praised the American government’s awareness of « the futility of any effort to arrest Mussolini’s resolute and upright action, » an « attitude which ha[d] served to moderate British policy » (FRUS 1935, 729), London « could not refrain from expressing the hope that [...]
the United States government could impress upon Mussolini the inevitable tragedy which would result from his making war on Abyssinia » (FRUS 1935, 613). On August 18, under Anglo-French pressure, Cordell Hull partially gave in and transmitted a « personal message » to Il Duce, « at the direction of the President, » urging him to resolve « the controversy between Italy and Ethiopia [...] without resort to armed conflict. » A disputable breach of neutrality pledges, this message was not to be released to the press, however (FRUS 1935, 739).

Similarly, individual action by grassroots Americans was banned: since the Addis government granted citizenship to skilled Black expatriates willing to contribute to the technical and economic development of the empire, African-Americans were forbidden to join the ranks of the Ethiopian army, their passports denied and US citizenship threatened (Plummer, 39, 43). The selection of a US citizen, Pitman Benjamin Potter, as one of Ethiopia’s emissaries to the League was accompanied by a denial in the New York Times of his being recommended by the State Department (FRUS 1935, 602); John H. Spencer, who was then beginning a thirty-year term as legal and foreign policy adviser to the Ethiopian Emperor, kept his appointment confidential at first, « to shield [the DOS] from the fear of becoming even indirectly involved in the conflict » (Spencer, 26, n. to p. 8). Conversely, requests for a visit by Haile Selassie were diplomatically turned down, and « confidentially, » « the [State] Department consider[ed] that the visit of any Ethiopian official or personage to the United States at [that] time for the avowed purpose of raising funds [was] highly undesirable and should be prevented if possible » (FRUS 1936, 217).

Throughout the period 1934-36, US diplomacy thus showed little evolution in the face of mounting world war threats, other than verbal alarm at the ominous concurrence of events in separate hemispheres, in Western Europe, Africa, South America, Japan and China. By December 1935, Cordell Hull assessed that « the Ethiopian-Italian war had [made] itself the most serious single factor in precipitating the Japanese-Chinese crisis », and underlined « the steadily increasing danger of its spreading and thus involving other nations, and, of course, increasing the danger of [the USA] becoming involved » (FRUS 1935, 868-69). The Rome-Tokyo Axis to be was lurking in the Treaty of Amity and Commerce signed by Ethiopia and Japan on November 4, 1930, which soon multiplied Japanese firms in Ethiopia and paved the way for the opening of a legation in the spring of 1936 (Duprey, 477-78; Spencer, 37). For the time being, however, ‘Monroeism’ focused US concern on Latin America, delegating colonial issues in the Middle East and Africa to the arbitration of European colonial powers. The League of Nations directorate—English, French, then Belgian—dramatically evoked colonial interests before self-determination, and the Roosevelt administration’s aloofness reflected an ideological and economic domestic imperative: preserve a European balance of « great powers » favorable to the values of « civilization » shared by the US, and avoid « the complete slowing down and almost the stopping in its tracks of the Trade Agreements program for the restoration of international finance and trade to their normal volume, on account of the fear and uncertainty of businessmen engendered by the war » (Sumner Welles, FDR & FA, 14, 223; Cordell Hull, FRUS 1935, 869). Regardless of the ‘spirit of 76’ that inspired Democratic anticolonial policies, a status quo on European spheres of interest was imperative for the time being, to bolster an uneasy peace coalition against German rearmament and Benito Mussolini’s ambiguous declarations of intent, as reported by Breckinridge Long to Cordell Hull in May 1935: « It is precisely in order to be fully prepared in Europe that we intend to protect ourselves from the rear in Africa » (FRUS 1935, 601).
A Eurocentric Case for Self-Determination

12 The carousel of European dispatches through which the Roosevelt administration indirectly witnessed the invasion and subsequent subjection of Ethiopia to fascist Italy reflected the eurocentric tradition of American diplomatic channels, regarding both information gathering and staff. The 19th century European-inspired division between ‘great powers’ and ‘small states’ still presided over international relations, and peace negotiations entailed individual representation, testifying to the ideological failure of the Wilsonian perspective on ‘collective security’. Thus did the Laval-Mussolini agreements of January 1935 and the Hoare-Laval resolution of December confirm the authority of European colonial powers over the Ethiopian legal case for self-determination. As the US Consul to Geneva put it to Cordell Hull in the first days of that year, « the attitude of the Secretariat Political Section has been to discount the Abyssinian claims, expressing the view that the question should not be brought before the League. The representatives of the small states deprecate such tendencies, stating that the recent assumption of League control by the great powers should not result in any hindrance to small states being heard » (FRUS 1935, 594).

13 We can see little of the idealistic anticolonialism that pushed its way into the Atlantic Charter in August 1941 in the American attitude toward Ethiopia in the mid-thirties. As it would before Stalin and international communism after the war, anticolonialism had to bow to greater perils, and the Democratic administration had to adapt to pragmatic imperatives. Bent on destabilizing the Red Sea region and the British Empire, Italian propaganda in Egypt had intensified, spread by « a large colony of citizens which [were] organized according to Fascist groups, » while the Italian media pressed for Egyptian independence. The US ambassador to Italy, indeed, warned the President that, to him, there was no doubt that the Italians would « be trouble-makers in Africa and attempt to connect Libya and Ethiopia. Across the Red Sea, they [would] try to reinforce their friendly relations with the Iman of Yemen and fortify him in his opposition to King Ibn Saud, the King of Arabia with the object of controlling that at present unoccupied and independent country. [...] They [would] entrench themselves in Ethiopia before they venture[d] to other fields » (FDR & FA, III, 3-5). London might find itself in a quandary, and subsequently « withdraw from cooperation on the Continent and seek to safeguard its Empire. [...] The dangers mentioned were a possible race riot from Cairo to the Cape; the threat to the headwaters of the Blue Nile; the threat to the route to India. » Colonial rivalries thus might curtail London’s role as guardian of the Eastern Mediterranean and the gates to the Middle East and the Indian Ocean, and strategically and economically weaken such democratic bulwarks as Britain and France: « particularly from the French point of view [there existed] the danger of bolstering Nazi strength in Austria which might follow in the wake of Italian preoccupation in Abyssinia » (FRUS 1935, 626-27). The international rationale for the Italo-Ethiopian War unquestionably was self-determination, but that of European nations in and out of their empires. Haile Selassie’s British exile in Bath after the Italian victory thus marked a doubly ironical acknowledgment of Ethiopian rights to national sovereignty, with the outcome of a 1941 British liberation taking the form of the annexation of Eritrea to the Ethiopian empire.

14 Hardly a decade before African decolonization, U.S. Chargés in European capitals pictured Mussolini’s Ethiopian venture « in the shape of a contest between the black and white races, » aimed at « reconstruct[ing] the old Roman Empire » at the expense of « backward » Abyssinia (FRUS 1935, 613, 633, 595). Even though running contrary to the
course of history, the Italian undertaking could nevertheless rely on a widespread ethnocentric judgment of the Ethiopians, and belief in the benefits of colonial guidance. In November 1934, in a manner reminiscent of the White Man’s Burden as applied to the Philippines for over a quarter century, the American chargé in Addis, W. Perry George, epitomized « the practical effects that an Italian occupation of Ethiopia might have »: economic development, including an outlet to the sea, control of slavery, modernization of communications, more security along British colonial frontiers, notwithstanding the fact that « Italy would come into possession of a vast, fertile colony, not only self-sustaining but easily capable of contributing to the active side of Italy’s trade balance. » The only drawbacks then listed highlighted the potential threat to the French and British neighboring colonies (FRUS 1934, 762-64). In March 1939, Under-Secretary of State Sumner Welles pondered over Ethiopia’s fate, reminiscing that « most of our people said ‘of course it is too bad. But what goes on in a remote and uncivilized corner of distant Africa can never affect us’ » (FDR & FA, 14, 221). A month later, FDR gave a new breath to America’s ‘civilizing mission’ during a press conference before members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors:

> Well, you can pass up Ethiopia—they were pretty wild people in Ethiopia, they were not very highly civilized from our point of view; maybe they would have come under the definition of what President Wilson, I think, acceded to in 1919 in talking about backward nations, but I often wonder what right, inherent right, you and I have got to call any nation backward. [...] Are they wholly uncivilized people? I wonder. Anyway, their independence is gone. There is nothing much we can do about it except to maintain in our diplomatic relations, perhaps only as a gesture, a gesture of not recognizing the King of Italy as Emperor of Ethiopia. The gesture has been made and history will record that the protest was made and lived up to for about four years (FDR & FA, 14, 387).

While the League of Nations still debated the appropriateness of placing economic sanctions on the two belligerents, as moral « gestures », Washington initiated a selective embargo on « arms, ammunition and implements of war » on October 5, 1935 (FDR PP 4, 412-16). Overall exports to and imports from Italy and Ethiopia, however, were neither prohibited nor even limited. The President felt it his « high moral duty » to « urge » the American people « against profiteering in the war between Italy and Ethiopia », and recommended that they « restrict their exports of essential war materials to either belligerent to approximately the normal peace-time basis. » Thus « it [could] not be said that they [were] seizing new opportunities for profit or that by changing their peace-time trade they [gave] aid to the continuation of the war » (FDR PP 5, 90). In view of the absence of legislative constraints on US corporations, Secretary of State Hull was similarly left with publicly lamenting increased exports of strategic materials (Renwick, 109 n. 14).

Even though pre-war US trade with Addis Ababa hardly reached half a million dollars, the Italians nonetheless complained that « the Ford Motor Company [was] furnishing to the Ethiopian Government large quantities of motor cars for military use »; the acquisition of ambulance planes was denied, aircraft sale being specifically prohibited (Henze, 51 ; FRUS 1935, 784, 811). More significantly, the Johnson Act of April 13, 1934 forbade « the granting of loans or credits by private citizens or corporations to the Italian Government », while the Export-Import Bank « declined to approve credits in connection with the shipment of products to Italy », and Italian assets and banking operations in the United States underwent Treasury scrutiny (FRUS 1935, 770, 810)\(^4\). Roosevelt’s « moral embargo » never explicitly referred to oil as an « implement of war », yet Rome’s war needs and boycott of

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British Shell increased demand on US companies, whom Italian « individual automobile owners » actively « patronized12 » (FRUS 1935, 814). The Council on Foreign Relations journal Foreign Affairs could not but acknowledge that « American exporters were making record sales to Italy [...] in spite of the Administration’s efforts at moral suasion. » If League members such as Britain and the Soviet Union chose to uphold oil shipments to Italy13, their sales decreased in the course of 1935, while the US part of Italy’s total oil imports rose by 12.5% for the whole year, to reach a record 17.8% for the war months of October-December (Scroggs, 524-25). While Federal agencies relayed the executive’s moral condemnation of Italy, threatened to release the names of the latter’s oil suppliers, and curtailed credit-lending facilities, a fear that private business interests « might have objected » to further restrictive action—admitting domestic economic recovery took second place in government policy to a colonial conflict in distant Africa—held back executive wrath,« especially when there was a chance of gaining permanent markets for American oil » (Bonn, 358 ; Parrish, 451-52).

17 If the total value of United States exports to Italy between November 1934 and June 1936 hardly increased—French exports were cut by more than half, British almost by ten, Swiss by one third (Renwick, 95)—exports of non-metallic minerals, including oil, rose by 50.8%, metals and manufactures by 45.5%, machinery and vehicles by 10.3% (Renwick, 97)14. While, indeed, overall US-Italy trade exchanges kept to « normal peacetime levels, » the sectorial breakdown highlights the American corporate blow to League sanctions which helped intensify state controls over Italian production and foreign exchange controls and, beside substantial gold sales and lira devaluation, eventually hurt Rome’s economic war effort by a mere -1.7% of GNP (Renwick, 22 ; Hufbauer, 62).

18 Subjected to brutal fascist rule and lethal gas, Ethiopia for all that self-serving neutrality attained martyr status in people’s minds, and Haile Selassie that of a hero, despite his noted lack of military preparedness and subsequent flight into exile. As Brenda Gayle Plummer assessed it, « like no other issue of the era, the Italo-Ethiopian War [...] prepared the ground for anticolonial protest in the next decade » (Plummer, 51), and most vocally so in the African-American community, whose foreign policy consciousness grew on a monthly basis. Even if emotional support movements were on the wane by February 1936 following Abyssinia’s military defeat while the Spanish Civil War kindled a new brand of political activism, the lessons were not lost on Black elites in America, who in New York City in 1937 established the Council on African Affairs, « the first African-American organization created for the express purpose of lobbying to affect policy toward Africa » (De Conde, 108). That same year, the Ethiopian World Federation began to reach out to a Pan-African diaspora from New York to the Caribbean and Latin America. By 1938, « the significance for African-Americans of the global crisis then occurring » motivated Socialist leader A. Philip Randolph, churchman Channing Tobias, Max Yergan of the Council on African Affairs, Will Pickens and Marion Cuthbert of the NAACP, Rev. William L. Imes of the Presbyterian Church, Mary McLeod Bethune of the National Council of Negro Women, and Dr. Julian Lewis of the University of Chicago to meet in Washington (Plummer, 55, 31). In its violent opposition to the oftentimes neighboring Italian-American community, this rising and internationally-conscious African-American elite differed little in its assessment of Ethiopia’s degree of ‘civilization.’ As Stefano Luconi has pointed out, the reappropriation of a white identity by Italian Americans frequently « reduced ethnic disputes to matters of race, » as part of a process of
« reethnicization » that he has demonstrated to have actually preceded World War II (Luconi 1999, 143).

The Minority Voices of Foreign Policy

The variety of ethnic action and clashes that accompanied the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in northeastern American cities has been largely documented, showing these racial interactions as so many cracks in the Democratic ethnic coalition. Ongoing Black segregation at home despite progressive Federal policies seemed as token a response as « benevolent neutrality » in this 20th-century renewed ‘scramble’ for the Horn of Africa. In their quest for an improved status and americanness denied the previous generation, Italian Americans discovered « the equation of whiteness, regardless of ethnicity with Americanism. » As « White Americans, » « they were free to either embrace or discard obvious indicators of ethnic origin, » something « Black Americans could not » (Plummer, 35). Such enduring hierarchies at home left little psychological room for African Americans to try and modify socio-political behavior on a global scale: at a time when talks of ‘civilizing’ their African kin were still rampant, the 1919 Pan-African Congress had failed to include the principle of « equality of nations » on its agenda, a principle which was also left out of the Covenant of the League of Nations (Plummer, 17); in 1935 still, Anthony Eden observed « that he could not persuade the small states that they had a real responsibility in carrying out the Covenant nor could he yet disabuse them of the idea that this would be a matter exclusively decided by the Great Powers » (FRUS 1935, 640).

International diplomatic networks matched the American foreign policy apparatus in responding to an ethnically pre-defined modus operandi, patterned on Western European traditions for the most part. W. D. Hubbard, US news correspondent in Ethiopia, thus regretfully signified the eurocentric ideological shackles of foreign policy-making: « I admired Haile Selassie immensely. […] Nevertheless, I firmly believed that it wasn’t right that Whites should be defeated in Africa. […] Any advance […] in Africa must be under the domination and leadership of the White race » (Duggan & Lafore, 125). For W.E.B. Du Bois reflecting on « the Ethiopian crisis », European interests had molded ideological and political bias, and imperialism found its justification in racism: « The belief that racial and color differences made exploitation of colonies necessary and justifiable was too tempting to withstand. As a matter of fact, the opposite was the truth; namely, that the profit from exploitation was the main reason for the belief in race difference » (Du Bois, 84).

Thus did the « general impression » spread that Ethiopian « diplomacy was not in good hands » (FRUS 1935, 622), and that the Imperial Ethiopian Government was ‘unfit’ for such international position: its delegates delivered « lengthy » addresses (FRUS 1935, 716), and the Emperor himself was hopeless at foreign languages, making his appeal to the League in Amharic when French had been called for, or reading a speech in a CBS radio broadcast in such broken English its meaning was lost on most; his son-in-law, on a pre-war White House visit FDR recollected, « could not speak English » either (Spencer, 74-75; FDR & FA XIV, 387). The Foreign Office branded the Ethiopians as « incapable of respecting any agreements which [were] not imposed and backed by force » (FRUS 1935, 638). Moreover, Ethiopia had possibly initiated the conflict, according to an August 1935 State Department memorandum which read « …the outbreak of armed conflict between Italy and Ethiopia and Italy » (FRUS 1934, 763; FDR & FA II, 601). Indeed, Cordell Hull had come to consider
by mid-1934 that the Addis government showed so little civility to State officials posted there that he contemplated canceling all diplomatic representation (FRUS 1934, 778).

Elitist judgment grew more conciliatory with time however, as appeasement towards Italy was disavowed in larger circles. Embassy and newspaper reports grew milder, praising the Empress’s heart-rending radio interviews, desperate efforts by Ethiopian emissaries to organize relief funds and petitions to the League of Nations, or college courses on Ethiopian history emphasizing the biblical heritage of the Orthodox Coptic Church. In a surprisingly lyrical vein, even if not quite as eloquently as in Black poet Langston Hughes’ ‘Ballad of Ethiopia’, the new US chargé in Addis honored Haile Selassie’s resilience: « His frail body seemed perhaps a trifle frailer and his thoughtful deepset eyes showed a profoundly perturbed soul. But his handshake had its usual firmness and his inscrutable features were lit up by the same winsome smile » (De Conde, 107; FRUS 1936, 63).

Popular sentiment predominantly sided with the down-trodden, and Italy was perceived by most as « a bully »: « American opinion was hostile to the Italian venture from the very start. [...] For Ethiopia there has been sympathy all along, and even when the public was reminded of slavery and other horrors that exist in Ethiopia, the reaction was not of any particular importance. » Anticolonial feeling combined with anti-European isolationism, and the condemnation of the Hoare-Laval proposals that pretended to seal the Ethiopians’ fate without consulting them was « unanimous, complete and unequivocal » (Adams, 222, 225). As an electoral body and with the November 1936 presidential elections in sight, the ‘silent majority’ thus left « no latitude » to the Roosevelt administration to « do more » (FDR & FA III, 106).

Concurrently though, Pan-African Black organizations, women’s, students’, peace groups, Protestant, Jewish and even Irish-American Catholic associations daily sprang up to defend Ethiopia against Italian aggression. Lobbying voices tore across the whole spectrum of US society. A week before the August 1935 neutrality bill was signed into law, the US Consul at Basel vibrantly urged his hesitant administration to support a strong-fisted blockade against Italy, in a manner anticipating the domino theory:

Italy must win in Africa or the Duce gradually falls. [...] England is fully aware of her decline in case Mussolini succeeds. [...] In case Italy does collapse after prolonged warfare, Nazi regime will move into Balkan zone at will. [...] All opinion agrees the League is about dead. If England does nothing her decline begins and dictatorial Europe will hardly be limited. The only chance of more democracy in the world depends on the blockade of warring Italy. Washington may be interested in this (FRUS 1935, 636).

Two weeks earlier, a Harlem rally sponsored by the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia and the American League Against Fascism had gathered 25,000 demonstrators, under the leadership of Roy Wilkins from the NAACP, future Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., labor leader A. Philip Randolph, Lester Granger from the National Urban League and University Professor William Pickens (Plummer, 46). Back in April, the NAACP had telegraphed the League of Nations on behalf of « 12,000,000 American Negroes, » demanding action to restrain dictator Benito Mussolini’s threatened invasion (De Conde, 107). For the sake of « strict neutrality », a variety of international lawyers and businessmen joined in January 1936 to defeat the Pittman-Reynolds bill that aimed at extending the August 31, 1935 embargo legislation to limit exports of « essential war materials other than arms, ammunition and implements of war, to ‘normal quantities’ » to be determined according to a given period of years before the war (FDR PP
In this election year, Italian-American lobbying proved especially organized, with fascist group members across the country writing five circular letters each, one to the President, one to the Secretary of State, and one to each of their Senators and Representatives (Luconi 2000, 137). The California Seamen’s Union succeeded for a while in delaying all West Coast departures in case the vessels carried strategic materials for Italy. The Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, a Popular Front organization combining communist and non-affiliated members, organized a 3,000-strong rally in March 1935 (Plummer, 50, 53). Even though most vocal in Harlem and Chicago, the African-American protest movement was not limited to urban America, and opened chapters in Mississippi, Ohio, Virginia, Indiana, and Alabama (Plummer, 47-48). Though bypassed by Italian-American individual donations to the Italian Red Cross, the American Red Cross raised more money for Ethiopia than all support groups combined (FRUS 1935, 884-85, 888, 895-96).

The latter example actually questions the validity of a purely dichotomic ethnic analysis of popular support for one of the belligerents or the other, as socio-economic factors obviously also defined patterns of allegiance or dissent. Black efforts, dynamic as they were—army volunteers were barred from enlisting in Ethiopian ranks, as noted earlier—, stumbled on the very economic deficiencies that made them a prime target for New Deal reform. The boycott of Italian-American stores signified just as much resentment at what was deemed these immigrants’ (relative) economic success; of course, most Italian-American workers in reality found « the preservation of the New Deal—rather than US foreign policy toward Italy—[their] primary concern, » and Italy’s renewed colonial glory « potential compensation for decades of intolerance and ethnic discrimination » (Luconi, 1999, 137; 2000, 136). If isolationist tendencies seemed to cut across the board within the dominant White group, socialists and communists attempted to reorient inter-ethnic strife toward a common struggle against imperialism. Similarly, a closer look at the Black community showed a minority bourgeoisie objecting to US intervention in the conflict (Plummer, 42, 47); so with the (African-) American Committee on the Ethiopian Crisis, established in 1935, whose name professed ecumenical patriotism rather than ethnic identification and separation.

Thus did ethnic, ideological and socio-economic divisions tear at the Democratic coalition, and both the President and Secretary of State repeatedly resorted to timely press releases, as an appeasement gesture to domestic agitation; two weeks before the August 1935 embargo resolution Cordell Hull hence advised his president that « public knowledge of the position of the Administration in regard to this matter would, I believe, serve a useful purpose at this time » (FDR & FA II, 605). The series of diplomatic dispatches covering the years 1934-36 shows the whole crisis as being systematically monitored personally by the Secretary of State, as African or even Middle Eastern affairs have rarely been, oftentimes referring to his President, and at all times trying to keep the foreign policy process active rather than submit to congressional isolationism. This preponderance of the executive, even though characteristic of Roosevelt’s ‘imperial presidency,’ was however paradoxically moderated by the momentary popular upsurge brought about by the conflict which the administration had to constantly keep in check, signifying perhaps to United States leaders at large that America could no longer ‘return to normalcy,’ and that the time for the ‘American Century’ had come.

Conclusion
The Abyssinian crisis of the mid-thirties constituted a symbolic case of unequal diplomacy, sternly prefiguring postcolonial third world struggles hardly more egalitarian when protected by the now globally representative United Nations. The national interest of « Great Powers » would again define priorities on behalf of the new nations, under principles such as those of ‘premature independence’ placing the protection of strategic shorelines and raw materials under the aegis of Western powers regardless of the Dark Continent’s internationally recognized right to self-determination. The obsolete ‘civilizing mission’ of the colonial White Man’s Burden developed against Nazi and fascist backgrounds into a more enlightened democratic mission against totalitarianism, a more palatable rationale characteristic of the ‘free world’. Hence did Britain grant Ethiopia her sovereignty back, « acquitt[ing] herself gracefully in the eyes of the Black races of her Empire as the protector of their rights, without so materially assisting the Ethiopians as to lead to the defeat of the White forces, » as related to Roosevelt by the U.S. Minister to Norway in February 1936, at the crux of what was not yet a European conflict (FDR & FA III, 212).

Ethiopia perhaps asserted her exceptionalism here once again, as her sovereignty recovered as early in the world war as 1941 enabled historians to endlessly ponder over Italian ‘colonization’ or ‘occupation’—as most Ethiopians would have it today—of the Abyssinian empire. The lessons in negotiations were learned, that made the annexation of Eritrea a diplomatic success, even if a mixed blessing which, in the wake of the Cold War, granted the empire enough strategic value for it to become a prize for superpower rivalry for another half-century.

Paradoxically enough, the liberation of Ethiopia by British forces also highlighted the inevitable globalization of Washington’s foreign commitments at the expense of its « special » ally. By August 1942 already, the United States operated a host of projects in Abyssinia under the authority of 336 military personnel and 2,829 civilians, and the newly reopened Bank of Ethiopia was issuing ‘Ethiopian dollars’ under the guidance of George A. Blowers, the former governor of the Bank of Monrovia in Liberia (Marcus 1983, 13 ; Spencer 105). A year later, the British military mandate over the region authorized the extension of Lend-Lease, and Ethiopia, grateful for US non-recognition of Italian rule and support for the ‘return’ of Eritrea, volunteered to undergo a model economic recovery program, soon supplemented by the signature with Washington on August 9, 1943 of a first mutual aid agreement. As in the case of lend-lease, the value of such aid was to be publicized, especially the « conditions and long-term advantages mutually profitable to the United States and Ethiopia and favorable to world peace » (Duprey 489-90). Thus did Ethiopia, in the words of a US Consul, become « an experimental center for aid and reconstruction operations » until the early 1960s (Marcus 1983, 16 ; Cizel), with New Deal relief programs inspiring the management and promotion of multilateral international economic relations and development favorable to the global liberalization of trade exchanges the Roosevelt administration had willed as a Good Neighbor policy.
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NOTES

1. The research for this article was made possible in part thanks to a grant from the Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands.
2. For the Ethiopian denunciation before the League of Nations of these Anglo-Italian economic spheres of influence agreed on at the expense of the empire’s national sovereignty, see Duprey 444-46 & 453-61.
3. Harold G. Marcus similarly situates the Ethiopian awareness of Italy’s early military preparations in September 1934 (Marcus 1994, 139).

4. The prospect of Venezuela enabling the Italians to counter oil embargoes by « eliminating » the United States « as an important factor in the embargo problem » could not be omitted either (FRUS 1936 107). A Joint Resolution of Congress formally « reaffirmed the principles of the Monroe Doctrine » on April 10, 1941.

5. In the spring of 1939, Emperor Haile Selassie kept calling on the US President to consider « using his great influence to secure the restoration to [his] people of their freedom and complete independence » (FDR & FA 14, 413).

6. The French owned the sole railway linking the Red Sea port of Djibouti to Addis Ababa, hence the economic reins to the Ethiopian economy, while the Royal House of Belgium was linked by marriage to that of Italy (Spencer 35, 73).

7. The main tributary to the Egyptian Nile, the Blue Nile, originates in Lake Tana, in the Ethiopian highlands.

8. William R. Scott’s account of The Sons of Sheba’s Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1941 shows in the chapter devoted to « The Hamite Controversy » how the Amhara tribe—Haile Selassie’s—views itself as « White » and displays ethnocentric behavior similar to that of Europeans towards the dark-skinned Ethiopians (Scott 192-207). UNIA leader Marcus Garvey certainly did not expect such a color line when he was slighted by the Emperor he was visiting in his British exile.

9. For the first time in the League’s history, a selection of economic sanctions—barring oil—was adopted on October 19, to be enforced only by November 18, 1935.

10. A press-released statement had already been issued in October 1935, in which FDR pretended not to « believe that the American people [would] wish for abnormally increased profits that temporarily might be secured by greatly extending our trade in such materials » (Gantenbein, 136).

11. The Treasury Department claimed impartiality since the Ethiopians had neither assets nor vessels worth monitoring.

12. Ambassador to Italy Long went on to report a similar Italian boycott of Egyptian and Indian—hence British—cotton: they « were now buying American cotton exclusively and committed as a matter of business policy and out of friendship to the United States to continue their exclusive purchases of American cotton in the future. »

13. Soviet oil shipments were largely compensated for by an increase in coal, grain and lumber deliveries (Plummer 49).

14. The overall trade balance was compensated for by a sharp decrease in textile fibres and manufactures (-30.3%), unmanufactured cotton (-30%), wood and paper (-29.6%), and animals and animal products (-67.6%) (Renwick 97).

15. Deleted words and italics in original.

16. Black Ethiopianist churches took the lead, but more ecumenical efforts voiced their protest as well, such as John Foster Dulles’ Federal Council of Churches. American Jews sided with the Ethiopian Falashas, while Irish-American Catholics mainly objected to imperialism, thus casting a different vote than the bulk of the American Catholic community, less immune to the Vatican’s ambiguous attitude toward Mussolini and fascism.

17. The hastily passed February 29, 1936 law merely proclaimed the extension of the arms embargo until May 1, 1937, and reiterated the prohibition of loans and credits to belligerent governments.
18. As a symbolic gesture, the liberation of Addis Ababa was staged with the returned
Emperor marching ahead of British troops.

AUTEUR

ANNICK CIZEL

Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris III