PARADOXES OF AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT DIPLOMACY IN THE EARLY COLD WAR PERIOD

This article examines the challenges, contradictions and ambiguous consequences of US agricultural development aid to Ethiopia in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. By focusing on US aid to its exceptional African ally (Ethiopia) in the nascent period of the Cold War, the article analyses the evolution of US cold war policy in Africa and the importance of Ethiopia in that process. While acknowledging the views of Frederick Cooper and Odd Arne Westad that the Cold War laid the foundations for Marxist-inspired revolutions and conflicts in Ethiopia, Somalia and Angola in the 1970s and 1980s, in that these were in part reactions against the significant US economic and military aid that these cold war allies had received, the article qualifies some of the arguments made by these writers.\(^1\) It argues that US influence in Ethiopia has been exaggerated and that the dominant wisdom serves to obscure the significant problems that Washington faced in pursuing its objectives in the African kingdom. Moreover, those objectives were much more susceptible to Ethiopian opposition and preferences than cold war historians acknowledge. Implicitly, then, the article criticizes representations of US cold war policies as monolithic, and also criticizes cold war histories that make cursory references to Africa without adequate examination of how US cold war diplomacy on the continent actually evolved.

The article argues for the importance of agricultural development in general and of Africa in particular to US cold war diplomacy. It shows how the earliest US development aid programme in Africa — the Point Four programme — worked out in a nation whose ruler originally seemed receptive to it, yet in the end baulked at it because of fears of stirring up a social revolution.

In the period from the late 1940s to the 1950s, America’s most significant diplomatic relations with a sovereign black nation were with the African kingdom of Ethiopia, and US interactions with Ethiopia provide telling evidence of the intersection of race and cold war diplomacy. The article highlights American racial sensitivity towards a black African kingdom, and shows how the imperial Ethiopian government took advantage of this, the better to shape US cold war diplomacy to its needs. The consequence was that in promoting economic development in Ethiopia, Washington treated officials of the African kingdom with more sensitivity and respect than it did when undertaking the same activity, at the same period of time, in India and Taiwan (then Formosa) in Asia or Guatemala in Latin America.

I

POINT FOUR AS DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND POLICY

President Harry Truman’s inaugural address of 20 January 1949 contained four points for building an enduring post-war peace. The first pledged American support for the maintenance of international security through the United Nations; the second promised American financial assistance to resuscitate the war-ravaged economies of Europe; while the third committed the United States to the global containment of communism. The fourth point, or Point Four, as it came to be known, pledged American economic and technical support for the eradication of hunger and poverty in economically underdeveloped countries. Point Four was inspired by two tenets of American idealism that are not universally shared: first, that only on sound economic foundations can stable nations be built; second, that only ‘freely governed’ societies can use the benefits of science and technology to improve and protect the lives of their citizens. Thus, Truman’s

2 The president elaborated upon his fourfold principles of world peace in a speech read on his behalf by Secretary of State Dean Acheson to the National Conference on International Economic and Social Development at the Shoreham Hotel in Washington, DC, on 9 April 1952: see United States Information Service, Official Text, Truman Address on Point IV Program (Washington, DC, 1952); United States National Archives (hereafter USNA), Record Group (hereafter RG) 286, Records of the Agency for International Development Mission to Ethiopia, Subject Files (1952–4), box 2.
fourth principle presumed that the American approach to nation-building provided the only viable model for the ‘development’ and ‘security’ of ‘underdeveloped’ societies. The emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie I, and his government never subscribed to this American model of nation-building. In fact, the American concept of development and security clashed with the official Ethiopian view that, historically, only militarily strong nations have had the political stability needed to build economically prosperous societies. This proved to be the most unyielding element in Ethiopian ideological opposition to US policy.

In June 1950 the US Congress passed the Act for International Development and voted $35 million to back Truman’s ‘bold new program’ of assisting the economic development of underdeveloped areas. Under the Act, the United States offered financial and technical aid to more than thirty countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa. In that same year, Ethiopia became one of the first recipients of Point Four aid, receiving $1 million for agricultural development. That was, arguably, a paltry sum compared with the $4.5 million allocated to India (although, of course, the population of the latter country was much larger) in the same year. But Ethiopia’s share of Point Four aid increased steadily in the 1950s until it began to decline steeply in 1960. In contrast to many countries in Asia and Latin America in this period, this aid focused primarily on economic development assistance rather than on economic and military assistance together.

Scholars who have studied American cold war development programmes in Latin America, such as Walter LaFeber, Stephen Rabe and Odd Arne Westad, have argued that US development aid was a form of economic and cultural intervention designed to reshape the recipient societies in the image of the United States; and that in Latin America, in particular, such aid so distorted the economies of the aid recipients that it fed a conviction that revolution was the only means of breaking the stranglehold of

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3 Emperor’s speech at the 37th Coronation Anniversary, 4 Nov. 1967, and speech from the throne, 2 Nov. 1969, in Important Utterances of H.I.M. Emperor Haile Selassie I, i (Addis Ababa, 1972), 197.

4 For detailed statistics on US economic and military aid to Ethiopia from 1950 to 1974, see Peter Schraeder, United States Foreign Policy toward Africa: Incrementalism, Crisis and Change (Cambridge, 1994), 184–5. On US economic aid to India for the same period, see Dennis Merrill, Bread and the Ballot: The United States and India’s Economic Development, 1947–1963 (Chapel Hill, 1990), 4, 50, 76.
American capitalism in the region. For Westad the Cold War represented for the global South (including Africa) a ‘continuation of colonialism through . . . different means’ and aimed at ‘inducing cultural . . . change in Third World societies’. George White has added that in this exercise in cultural transformation, Ethiopia had no alternative but to ‘sacrifice [its] interests’ and follow America’s leadership. A detailed analysis of US relations with Ethiopia, however, tells a different story, a story about Ethiopia’s many successful objections to US policy that reflects the African kingdom’s perception of itself and of the US model of modernization.

II

ETHIOPIA IN POST-WAR AMERICAN GLOBAL PRIORITIES

From the standpoint of the 1950s development theory, the poor condition of Ethiopia’s peasants made the kingdom a good candidate for Point Four aid. Ethiopia’s land-based class structures, however, hampered the implementation of Point Four’s reformist goals.

Ethiopia’s peasant economy operated in a society where social status and political power resided in an anachronistic system of land tenure. Before Ethiopia’s revolutionary land reform of March 1975, following the overthrow of the imperial government, two types of land tenureship, rist and gult, existed in the kingdom. Rist lands, as heritable lineage property, were subject to frequent parcelling out among a large number of claimants. Rist was the dominant system of landholding in the northern provinces. Many peasants in rist landholding districts owned about 10 hectares of land or less. Their lack of secure ownership of land made them less eager to improve their holdings for the purpose of increasing food production, and thus less attracted by this key objective of the Point Four programme. Gult was a land tenure system based on royal prerogative. The emperor offered large tracts of fertile gult land, mostly in the central and southern

6 Westad, Global Cold War, 3, 398.
7 George White Jr, Holding the Line: Race, Racism, and American Foreign Policy toward Africa, 1953–1961 (Lanham, 2005), 63.
provinces, to a privileged group of aristocrats, soldiers and loyalists as means of building domestic political and security alliances. To survive in an economy that was based on loyalty to the emperor and the landowning aristocracy, peasants with little or no land had to enter into various sharecropping tenancies with unscrupulous landlords. Big landowners in southern Ethiopia operated sharecropping arrangements that often took one-third or more of the annual produce of their tenants. The substantial food stocks that landlords accumulated from such exploitative tenancies made the reforms that the Point Four programme mandated unattractive to landowners. And as a landowner himself, the emperor naturally identified with the privileged class of landlords. These realities of Ethiopia’s political economy were not lost on the minds of American policy makers in Washington and in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, even as they tried to nudge a reluctant emperor towards agrarian reforms.  

The kingdom was seen by the United States as important to its global interests for several reasons. The enormous size of Ethiopia—a land surface nearly twice the size of the US state of Texas—made it one of the largest polities in Africa. The United States had had diplomatic contacts with Ethiopia since 1903. But as the Cold War evolved, Ethiopia acquired political, military, cultural and symbolic importance in Washington. Politically, Ethiopia had been the only African state, besides US-influenced Liberia, to remain independent throughout nearly a century of European colonization of the African continent. Since Ethiopia shared borders with the African colonies of America’s European allies in the Cold War, the political stability of Ethiopia was essential to any successful defence of European interests in the continent. Moreover, as decolonization got under way, Emperor Haile Selassie could also serve as an elder statesman through whom the United States could influence the political attitudes of a new generation of African leaders. Economically, Ethiopia had the potential to become a successful showcase of American development aid on a continent with a long history of economic exploitation and political control by European nations.


Moreover, with its two strategic Red Sea ports, Assab and Massawa, a pro-American Ethiopia could ensure the safety of Western shipping lanes to Asia, Europe and the Middle East. As Jeffrey Lefebvre has accurately noted, maintaining a diplomatic and military presence in Ethiopia, located in the Horn of Africa, allowed the United States to project power in a strategic region while also defending American interests across the Arabian peninsula against the Soviet Union, which was the principal competitor for influence in the Horn.¹⁰

Undoubtedly, these strategic calculations influenced the conclusion of a Mutual Security Agreement between the United States and Ethiopia in May 1953. Yet it is important to note that the Agreement did not commit the United States to a military defence of Ethiopia in the event of a domestic crisis or an external invasion unrelated to the Cold War. And the Haile Selassie government did not understand the Agreement to impose any such obligations on the United States. Nevertheless, the emperor did expect Washington to reward Ethiopian goodwill with military equipment and to provide a psychological deterrent against the Christian kingdom’s Muslim neighbours: Egypt to the north, Somalia to the east and Sudan to the west. Under the Mutual Security Agreement, the United States acquired the former Italian radio installation at Kagnew in Ethiopia’s northern province, Eritrea, which became an independent state in 1993. According to Peter Schraeder, the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency and the US Congress viewed the Kagnew installation as an ‘irreplaceable listening post’ and America’s ‘most important radio facility in the entire world’. It was also important to the functioning of the Stonehouse Project, a secret US telecommunication installation operated by the Pentagon and NASA to intercept radio transmissions to and from Soviet bloc countries.¹¹

Besides the cold war strategic objectives, US interest in Ethiopia was also symbolic and even cynical, since it formed an element in the post-war American attempt to manage its race relations at home. As the Cold War evolved, America’s hopes of bringing democracy and improved standards of living to people in

Africa and Asia were undermined by persistent questions about how the country treated its populations of African descent. As Chester Bowles, America’s ambassador to India and Nepal in the early 1950s, has recounted in his memoirs, Indian politicians who wanted to expose the contradictions of American democracy and claims to leadership of the ‘free world’ never failed to ask the question ‘What about America’s treatment of the Negro?’12 This question became even more poignant in September 1957, when nine black (African American) schoolchildren admitted to an all-white high school in Little Rock, in the American state of Arkansas, were refused entry to the school’s premises on the orders of the state governor. For a country struggling to deal with its domestic racism in order to deflect criticism of it abroad, this particular treatment of black children in Arkansas was damaging. Reflecting on this crisis, which happened during his presidency, in his memoir, President Dwight Eisenhower confirmed that his greatest concern about the school desegregation crisis in Little Rock was that ‘around the world’, Soviet propagandists used images of it to highlight ‘racial terror’ in the United States.13

President Eisenhower may have been concerned about how racial tensions in America featured in Soviet propaganda, but he was even more sensitive to their potential impact on the attitudes of particular African leaders such as Ethiopia’s Haile Selassie, Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser and Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah. In particular, Ethiopia’s status as an uncolonized African kingdom had made it a very powerful symbol of racial pride for Americans of African heritage. Thus, Eisenhower’s concern to counter criticism of the United States at home and abroad as a racist nation required a positive and even deferential relationship with Ethiopia.14 By showing respect for a black African leader who was also revered by black Americans, American policy makers hoped to reassure America’s black population that only the American way of life could guarantee them racial equality through a gradual but progressive reform of the country’s

racial problems. Arguably, racial sensitivity also shaped the deferential US approach to the implementation of its Point Four development programme in Ethiopia. At least, its policy there contrasted with US conduct in India, where, as Dennis Merrill has shown, American officials rode ‘roughshod over Indian sensitivities’ when pursuing Point Four economic development.

In a very cynical and contradictory way, Ethiopia also served as a psychological foil in American domestic race relations. White segregationists in the State Department and Congress who resisted racial equality in the United States could point to the discriminatory treatment of dark-skinned people in Ethiopia to rationalize the condition of black people in the United States. Information about Ethiopia’s colour-based discrimination appears to have reached America’s corridors of power from American citizens living in Ethiopia in the 1950s. One such American was John Spencer, Haile Selassie’s private legal adviser, who was well connected to the Ethiopian court and also the US State Department. Spencer has written in his memoir that prejudices against dark complexion in Ethiopia were similar to those in the United States. The African kingdom’s colour bar prevented the social advancement of dark-skinned Ethiopians, such as the Gurage and Oromo, and put the emperor’s court on a par with occupants of the White House. As Spencer reveals, the ‘black American’ wife of Tesfaye Gebre-Egzyabher, Ethiopia’s permanent representative at the United Nations in the early 1950s, could not be admitted to the emperor’s palace because of her skin colour, although the same was true of the white French wife of Aklilu Habte-Wold, Ethiopia’s foreign minister from 1947 to 1958. Spencer claims that most Ethiopians called white people ‘red’ in the same way that most Americans referred pejoratively to American Indians (that is, the original population of the United States). Perhaps Ambassador Joseph Simonson was referring to Ethiopia’s brand of racism and xenophobia when he advised

15 Ibid., 86. For more information about how the United States used its cold war relations with Ethiopia and the new nation states of Africa to manage its domestic race relations, see Mary L. Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Princeton, 2000), chs. 2–3; Michael L. Krenn, The Color of Empire: Race and American Foreign Relations (Washington, DC, 2006), 83–4.

16 Merrill, Bread and the Ballot, 9, 74.

the State Department, in April 1955, to pursue a cautious policy towards Ethiopia because of the ‘racial pride’ of Ethiopians.18 The extent to which Ethiopia was in fact a colour-conscious and racist society has been challenged by the Ethiopian historian Fikru Negash Gebrekidan, who argues that although some Ethiopian ‘local officials or ministers’ who interacted closely with foreign diplomats may have regarded themselves as racially superior or exhibited antipathy towards blackness, Ethiopians have, historically, had a collective sense of themselves as ‘black’ and ‘African’. The most convincing evidence, he argues, lies in Ethiopia’s demonstrated commitment to pan-Africanism.19

In sum, Ethiopia played a multi-purpose role in America’s cold war strategy, and those interests were not exclusively strategic in the narrow military and security sense of maintaining an ally in power and of keeping the kingdom stable in order to profit from a military intelligence installation. Ethiopia provided the United States with a symbolic opportunity to be seen to be doing good for black Africans and thus, it was hoped, with the possibility of placating black Americans at home and of deflecting criticism of American racism abroad. Point Four agricultural aid, which was designed to help Ethiopian peasants improve their living standards, was, therefore, central to this symbolic objective. If Ethiopian agriculture was to be successfully developed, this would also demonstrate the benefit of maintaining good relations with the West and, potentially, discourage decolonizing African nations from being drawn towards a Soviet model of development. Joseph Simonson captured this mood of the 1950s accurately when he advised the State Department to preserve the ‘association of the most powerful western nation with the African country of greatest prestige [Ethiopia]’.20

III

ETHIOPIA AND THE MEANING OF DEVELOPMENT

Michael Latham has argued that US foreign aid programmes such as Point Four in the 1950s and the Alliance for Progress in the 1960s were inspired by the ‘modernization’ and ‘development’ theories of the cold war period. According to Latham, these ‘development’ programmes betrayed widespread assumptions about the superiority of the United States and its ability to transform ‘backward’, ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘materially and culturally deficient’ societies.21 Latham may be correct. However, American officials who implemented the Point Four programme in Ethiopia took great care to avoid making any such assumptions apparent in its actual implementation, for they understood how most Ethiopians viewed any such modernization of their kingdom. With the exception perhaps of that small segment of educated Ethiopians who carried out an abortive coup against the emperor’s government in December 1960, the majority of Ethiopians were never drawn towards emulating America’s model of economic development.22 If the Ethiopian governing elite and educated proponents of reform aspired to reshape their society in the image of another nation, it was Japan they sought to emulate. Haile Selassie’s speeches to his domestic audience in the 1950s and 1960s are suffused with admiration for the model of development pursued by Japan, which, in his view, had managed to create a ‘flourishing economy’ without losing its tradition and ‘social values’.23 The Ethiopian historian Bahru Zewde has acknowledged that from the early years of the twentieth century on, ‘almost all’ Ethiopian intellectuals bent on reform looked to Japan’s approach to modernization as ‘the model . . . to follow in transforming Ethiopia from the medieval to the modern age’. These ‘pioneers of change’, as Bahru calls them, saw attractive parallels between Japan and Ethiopia since both were monarchies with strong military traditions and headed by an emperor. The Meiji reformers in Japan had sought to modernize their society in

22 Author’s interview with Tesfaye Mekasha Amare, former vice-minister of foreign affairs in the imperial Ethiopian government, Addis Ababa, 30 July 1995.
23 Emperor Haile Selassie’s speech at the Debre Zeit sheet-metal factory, 2 Oct. 1966, in Important Utterances of H.I.M. Emperor Haile Selassie I, i, 100.
order to survive in a modern world of competing nation states while preserving indigenous traditions. What Ethiopian reformists found particularly impressive was that within sixty years of the onset of reform in 1868, the Japanese achieved levels of economic development and military readiness that it took Western countries centuries to accomplish.24 The Italian invasion and occupation of Ethiopia (1935–41) lent credence to the view that the preservation of the kingdom’s security through the modernization of its defence forces was the foundation of social and economic development, and this consideration, too, made the Japanese model attractive. Scepticism towards American-style modernization was thus quite widespread among both the governing elite and the intelligentsia.

Nevertheless, Haile Selassie deemed it expedient to encourage the expansion of American interests in his monarchy for reasons both of his own personal security and of Ethiopia’s ability to withstand any threat to its integrity. Sections of the Ethiopian aristocracy still harboured resentment towards the emperor for seeking exile in Britain during the Italian occupation instead of leading his troops against Mussolini’s forces.25 Haile Selassie thus chose to pursue a pro-American policy in the early years of the Cold War rather similar to that pursued by Iran and Saudi Arabia. To cultivate American favour, he sent a contingent of 1,069 Ethiopian soldiers to fight alongside British, Canadian and American troops in Korea, granted the United States the right to operate the Kagnew installation for twenty-five years and backed US opposition to the admission of the People’s Republic of China to membership of the United Nations in the General Assembly. Haile Selassie expected the United States to reciprocate these overtures by offering substantial military aid to Ethiopia, as the United States was doing in Korea, in order to help him create a modern national army to preserve his throne. To his dismay, the United States did not provide Ethiopia with military aid of the scale or quality he desired. This reflected the essentially secondary position that Ethiopia occupied in Washington’s global strategy, but in private conversations with US officials Haile Selassie did not hesitate to express his displeasure at Washington’s failure to meet

his defence needs.26 If it preferred to place the accent on economic growth through agricultural development, as per the Point Four programme, the United States nevertheless realized that economic modernization had profound political and social implications and that this entailed some element of military assistance. Since the land tenure system was central to the maintenance of the emperor’s power, and thus to the political stability of the kingdom, the United States realized that Ethiopia’s security concerns could not be ignored.

‘Military assistance’, albeit never to the degree that the emperor wanted, was an integral part of the development-related initiatives that the United States undertook in Ethiopia in the 1950s. From 1951 to 1961, it gave $53 million in official military aid to Ethiopia compared with the $95.1 million it offered in economic development aid in the same period.27 The lower priority that Washington gave to military aid to Ethiopia at this time was motivated by a desire on the part of both Democratic and Republican administrations to ‘avoid a military build-up’ that could potentially strain the Ethiopian economy and ‘lead to commitments for indefinite US support’.28 Washington’s reluctance to create a military dependency in Ethiopia was a reflection of its awareness of the wider politics of the Cold War. US policy makers anticipated that an American-assisted arms build-up in Ethiopia could trigger comparable requests to the Soviet Union by organized Somali ethnic groups residing in Ethiopia’s eastern province (Ogaden), who yearned for the reunification of all Somalis scattered throughout north-east Africa into a future ‘Greater Somalia’.29 Top US officials such as President Eisenhower, Vice-President Nixon and Secretary of State Foster Dulles were aware of the ‘dangers’ Somali irredentist nationalism posed to

26 Imperial Ethiopian Government, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Summary of Remarks Made by His Imperial Majesty at Audience Granted on March 12, 1957 to the Vice President of the United States [Richard M. Nixon]’: USNA, RG 59, Lot Files, no. 57, D616, box 13. For more information about Ethiopia’s feelings about the poor quality of American military hardware, see White, *Holding the Line*, 55–6.
Ethiopia. In 1957 the American Embassy in Ethiopia informed the White House and the State Department about intense anti-Ethiopian and anti-American campaigns that ‘communist sympathisers’ were waging in Ogaden.\textsuperscript{30} John Spencer has identified these sympathisers as ‘the Moslem states led by Egypt and supported by the Soviet Union’.\textsuperscript{31} Their radio propaganda campaigns of support for a ‘Greater Somalia’ that would incorporate Ogaden had begun in 1951 and intensified in the late 1950s. Yet notwithstanding official American recognition of possible Soviet armed support of Somali irredentists — which became a reality in the 1960s in the shape of an independent Republic of Somalia — Washington chose to prioritize agricultural aid and limit arms supplies to Ethiopia. In this respect, US policy in Ethiopia differed significantly from its policy towards Korea, Taiwan, French Indo-China and Guatemala in the 1950s, where the Truman and Eisenhower administrations saw military assistance as inextricable from economic aid.\textsuperscript{32} Haile Selassie inevitably had different priorities. Under the prevailing cold war conditions, military and security issues, not agricultural development, were his priority. As he put it in 1963, ‘when so many are participating in the arms race, Ethiopia has no choice but to strengthen herself militarily for her defence against any aggressor’.\textsuperscript{33} By this time, his security concerns had become acute, since Somali irredentists, now backed by an independent Republic of Somalia armed by the Soviet Union, were operating from the eastern borders of Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{34}

IV

IMPLEMENTING POINT FOUR

As Trudy Peterson has observed, US policy makers of the 1950s were ‘agricultural fundamentalists’ who viewed agricultural development as ‘the foundation of national prosperity’.\textsuperscript{35} Key

\textsuperscript{30} Lefebvre, \textit{Arms for the Horn}, 80–1.
\textsuperscript{31} Spencer, \textit{Ethiopia at Bay}, 277–8.
\textsuperscript{32} Merrill, \textit{Bread and the Ballot}, 78; Rabe, \textit{Eisenhower and Latin America}, 62.
\textsuperscript{33} Emperor’s speech at the Guenet military academy, 19 May 1963, in \textit{Important Utterances of H.I.M. Emperor Haile Selassie I}, i, 15.
\textsuperscript{34} Lefebvre, \textit{Arms for the Horn}, 80.
\textsuperscript{35} Trudy Huskamp Peterson, \textit{Agricultural Exports, Farm Income and the Eisenhower Administration} (Lincoln, Nebr., 1979), 18.
Washington policy makers such as Clark Clifford, White House assistant and originator of the Point Four idea, Averell Harriman, special assistant to President Truman, and George McGhee, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern, South Asian and African affairs, saw the development of the food production capacities of Ethiopia’s peasants, through the training of a new generation of market-oriented farmers, as essential to the success of US cold war diplomacy.36 Luther H. Brannon, ex-president of Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical Arts College, who was to become the first president of the Point Four land-grant college in Ethiopia, also believed that development of Ethiopia’s agrarian economy was America’s ‘most important international technical assistance task’.37 Nevertheless, despite their demonstrated enthusiasm to make Ethiopia a model of US-assisted development in Africa, American policy makers took great care not to impose development programmes on Haile Selassie. On 20 September 1950 the State Department, under a Democratic administration, asked the American Embassy in Addis Ababa to solicit development proposals from the Ethiopian court. In response, the Ethiopian government requested American aid to advance education, locate minerals, register land, conduct livestock censuses and improve marketing standards. These proposals revealed the different development priorities of the Ethiopian government from those of US officials, above all its desire to avoid land reform. Request for American assistance in instituting standards for grading cereals, for example, was fully in line with the interests of imperial landlord officials who produced grains for export to Europe and the Middle East.38

On 16 June 1951 the United States signed a Point Four technical agreement with Ethiopia that accommodated some of the emperor’s requests, but broadly represented Washington’s


preferred framework in that it was intended to ‘develop agricultural and related resources’ for the ultimate purpose of ‘further[ing] social and economic progress’. American policy makers concluded that very little ‘development’ could be achieved through Point Four aid if the majority of Ethiopia’s farming population remained untouched by scientific methods of food production. With this in mind, the United States signed a supplementary agreement on 15 May 1952 to fund jointly with the Ethiopian government a land-grant College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts to produce a new generation of educated farmers who would champion the modernization of agriculture. Under this agreement, the United States pledged to provide a substantial portion of the teaching staff and research equipment for the proposed agricultural college. The Truman administration hoped that native specialists trained in agricultural research and experimental farms would spearhead the transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture in Ethiopia. In this respect, the policy resembled that which Washington was pursuing concurrently in Taiwan. However, the class and regional structures of Ethiopia, as well as the divergent security and modernization goals of Addis Ababa and Washington, were to prevent the American aid programme from achieving the same level of success that was accomplished in Taiwan.

The conclusion of Point Four aid agreements did not signal that the Ethiopian government had come round to accepting their underlying premises and broader strategic objectives. President Truman reaffirmed these in October 1952 when he claimed that ‘it is starving people and people who have grievances against their overlords that cause revolutions’. Haile Selassie and officials of Ethiopia’s Agriculture Ministry absolutely rejected this correlation of poverty with susceptibility to communist revolutions. While the emperor shared the broader American

40 Nick Cullather, ‘“Fuel for the Good Dragon”: The United States and Industrial Policy in Taiwan, 1950–1965’, in Peter L. Hahn and Mary Ann Heiss (eds.), Empire and Revolution: The United States and the Third World since 1945 (Columbus, 2001), 254, 255.
41 ‘Point Four and World Peace’, Remarks by the President, Dept. of State Bull., xxvii (1952), 568.
cold war view that ‘communism posed a grave danger to world peace’, he dismissed any corresponding conclusion that Ethiopia was so prone to poverty as to make communist ideologies attractive to its people. Two months after Truman’s speech, in December 1952, Haile Selassie asserted that ‘Communism thrives where there is poverty. Thank God we are not so poor. Our people own their own land and have enough food’. This, of course, paid no heed to Ethiopia’s exploitative system of land tenure. For the emperor and his officials, the greatest threat to Ethiopia lay not in a lack of economic development but in political insecurity: namely ‘the campaign for the dismemberment of [the Ethiopian empire]’ by domestic opponents and Somali irredentists. Arguably, in retrospect, this proved to be correct in that the immediate threat to the integrity of the Ethiopian state in this period came from those who opposed the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia by the United Nations in September 1952 and from Somali irredentists in eastern Ethiopia, backed by Soviet weaponry.

Several key American agencies and officials took part in implementing the Point Four agreements, namely in Washington the State Department and the Foreign Operations Administration, which was responsible for overseeing foreign economic aid, and in Ethiopia the American Embassy and the US Operation Mission to Ethiopia (USOM-E), the Point Four agency on the ground. The State Department and the Foreign Operations Administration wanted an American-led rapid transformation of Ethiopia’s agricultural economy consistent with American economic development activities in India and the Philippines. Quick results were needed in order to impress the Ethiopian people; to persuade Haile Selassie, Africa’s elder statesman, of the efficacy of the American approach to nation-building; to obtain a psychological advantage over the Soviet Union in the Cold War; and possibly to reassure Americans of African descent of US goodwill towards a black nation. Officials of USOM-E, who were based in

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the Ethiopian capital, wanted a different approach. They urged a gradual pace of economic transformation within existing Ethiopian institutions. From a comparative perspective, USOM-E’s preference mirrored the US approach to its economic development policy in Taiwan, as described by Nick Cullather. There the United States supported state-controlled programmes and was ‘less dogmatic’ in promoting economic development.  

Officials of the American Embassy in Addis Ababa shared the opinions of their Point Four (USOM-E) colleagues. Their support for a gradual approach to agricultural development, based upon local institutions, derived from a pragmatic assessment of Ethiopian culture and domestic politics. They did not wish to raise the hackles of Haile Selassie and his landlord officials and thus trigger accusations at home and in Moscow of American imperialist attitude towards Ethiopia.

As early as 1950, the US ambassador to Ethiopia, George Merrell, had underlined the obstacles that any US development project would face under the leadership of the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture. According to Merrell, the minister of agriculture Ephrem Tewelde Medhin, who was from Eritrea, was ‘so preoccupied with . . . [the] settlement of the Eritrean [independence] question’ that he devoted little time or interest to his ministry. His vice-minister, Mahteme Selassie, reportedly owned so many acres of land devoted to grain cultivation that he was naturally opposed to American plans for land reform. Furthermore, the Embassy held the view that Mahteme ‘relied too much upon the advice of George Terchininov [sic]’, a Russian resident in Ethiopia who served as administrative assistant in the Ministry of Agriculture. His ‘anti-American and anti-Western’ stance rankled with embassy staff. These concerns, clearly driven by internal Ethiopian realities and by larger cold war politics,

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45 Cullather, “Fuel for the Good Dragon”, 254, 255.
48 Merrell to Secretary of State, no. 86, 19 Apr. 1950, ‘Recent Developments in the Agricultural Field in Ethiopia’: USNA, RG 166, FASNR (1950–4), 875.20/4-1950, box 141.
disposed the Embassy towards the position of Marcus Gordon, director of the American Point Four programme in Ethiopia, who advocated putting control of US agricultural development projects into the hands of Ethiopians.\footnote{Marcus J. Gordon, US Director of Technical Cooperation in Ethiopia, to HE Blatta Ephrem Tewelde Medhin, Minister of Agriculture, n.d.: USNA, RG 84 (1950–5), box 8. See also Marcus J. Gordon to Secretary of State, no. 343, 13 Feb. 1953, ‘Action Taken in Ethiopia to Implement the Recommendations of the NEADS Rome Conference’: USNA, RG 166, FASNR (1950–4), box 141A; Marcus J. Gordon to Foreign Operations Administration, 1 Sept. 1953, ‘Twelfth Program Summary of the Technical Cooperation Service for Ethiopia’, 1 July–31 Aug. 1953: \textit{ibid.}, box 141.} Gordon maintained that the agricultural practices of Ethiopian peasants had a rational basis in centuries of mastery of the climate, topography and soil types. Traditional Ethiopian farming practices needed to be enhanced rather than obliterated, as officials of the Foreign Operations Administration thought. In the event, pragmatism and racial sensitivity (or perhaps deference to royalty) prevailed over development theories and cold war dogma once it came to implementing the US-assisted agricultural development, and this left plenty of room for the Ethiopian government to shape US cold war policy to its needs.

The Truman administration initially vested the US Department of Agriculture with responsibility for choosing a suitable site in Ethiopia for the Point Four agricultural college. In its eagerness to maximize Ethiopia’s coffee exports to the United States, the Department wanted to locate the agricultural college in Jimma, a major coffee-producing province.\footnote{J. Rives Childs to Secretary of State, no. 28, 26 July 1951, ‘Visit of Point Four Administrator and Suggestions for Project Agreement for Agricultural School’: USNA, RG 166, FASNR (1950–4), box 141, 875.00-TA/7-2651.} But it quickly abandoned the idea when Haile Selassie opposed the location of such a prestigious development project in a traditionally dissident province. In deference to the emperor, the Truman administration reassigned the task of choosing the site to the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical Arts College, the American institution that had agreed to develop the curriculum of the proposed Point Four college. A team of faculty members from Oklahoma wanted the college to be located at a place easily accessible to the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture and ‘not more than 80 [kilometres’] distance from Addis Ababa’.\footnote{Addis Ababa University, \textit{Study Reports on Proposed Alemaya University of Agriculture}, i (Jan. 1985), 1.} The team
recommended Debre Zeit, a town 50 kilometres south-east of Addis Ababa, as the best location. Again the emperor rejected the recommendation and insisted that the college be located in Harar province, about 500 kilometres from Addis Ababa. In 1954 he offered land for the establishment of the agricultural college at a site that was 6 kilometres away from the town of Alemaya and therefore very close to his birthplace in Ejersa Goro. The emperor’s will prevailed, but not without dismaying officials of the US Department of Agriculture, especially Secretary Ezra Taft Benson. Eventually, the Oklahoma College and the US Department of Agriculture made Debre Zeit, the rejected site of the Point Four college, the location of a new research station. Here, American and Ethiopian scientists conducted research into food, fibre crops, oil seeds and vegetables. They took advantage of the location of Debre Zeit in the best teff-producing area of Ethiopia to develop this local grain into a hybrid variety that became known throughout Ethiopia as ‘American teff’. In the 1950s the Debre Zeit research station became the most prominent US-assisted development project outside Alemaya College itself.

The controversy over the site of the agricultural college highlights one important dilemma among many in the US–Ethiopian relationship. US policy makers seem to have displayed more sensitivity to Ethiopian feelings than they did towards India’s in the 1950s. In his study of the pursuit of US agricultural development policy in India, Dennis Merrill has shown that US policy makers often displayed ‘ethnocentric’ attitudes in their disregard of Indian opinions. He attributes these attitudes to American ‘misreading’ of India’s history and political culture — a colonial history that bred the jealous protection of national sovereignty. Ethiopia did not have a colonial history as India did, but it did have a similar sensitivity towards its political sovereignty on an African continent of European colonies. Why the United States acted with more deference towards Ethiopia than India may in part be attributed to the different personalities of the political leaders with whom American officials interacted. According to Merrill, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was ‘abrasive’ in style and openly critical of American cold war policy; that style may have provoked American anger. By contrast, Haile Selassie was calm in the usual style of a monarch and never openly criticized

52 Merrill, *Bread and the Ballot*, 54, 57, 74.
the United States, which may have evoked a more cordial American response. Nonetheless, we cannot overlook the influences of historical memory and racial sensitivity on America’s more deferential attitude towards Ethiopia. As Thomas Borstelmann has noted, it was in Africa during the Cold War that ‘the White men in Washington who wielded enormous global power . . . wrestled with the . . . demands of people of color at home [in the United States] and abroad for full equality’. In the post-Second World War period, Washington could not afford to lecture Ethiopia, the victim of fascist Italy’s brutal aggression and a kingdom around which black Americans rallied in racial solidarity.

Once established, the Alemaya College produced poultry feeds and helped neighbouring peasants breed cattle through artificial insemination. Its annual Farmers’ Day activities attracted peasants to demonstrations of the benefits of science to plant and animal husbandry. Some Ethiopian peasants certainly benefited from the college. Older subsistence peasants at Alemaya fondly remember the names of the American teachers at the college who helped them to improve their farming and living conditions. Yusuf Abdi, now over 60 years old, explained that before the establishment of Alemaya College he grew only two varieties of maize. The Americans introduced improved varieties of barley, wheat, corn and sorghum to Alemaya and neighbouring villages. According to Yusuf Abdi, peasants who lived closer to the college grew and sold enough food to overcome famine. Abu-Bakr Adam, now over 55 years old, was ‘unhappy when the Americans left’ during the Ethiopian revolution (1975–91) because ‘Dr [Yack] Moseley’ helped him and other peasants to maintain an impressive level of prosperity in poultry farming. He exported eggs to Djibouti until the 1970s, when Ethiopia’s revolutionary military government nationalized his poultry farm. The government sold all the chickens to the college cafeteria and used his large farm as a storage for international relief aid. Abu-Bakr recalls that Dr Moseley and ‘Dr [Milton] Wells’ were ‘always on the farm with farmers’, helping with farm activities and offering advice on plant and animal breeding. In the view of these peasants, it was ‘because of the Americans’ that Alemaya escaped the lethal famines that occurred frequently in north-eastern Ethiopia during

the 1950s and 1960s. These positive local testimonies about American cold war development aid to Ethiopia may not be typical of peasant experiences even in the small town of Alemaya, but they provide some significant qualification of the dominant interpretations of the nature and impact of US cold war policies.

In assessing US cold war development policy in Ethiopia, the historian Harold Marcus has argued that the United States was ‘fundamentally unconcerned’ about Ethiopia’s ‘internal situation’, and did not ‘attempt to force basic reforms’ in the kingdom. Marcus sees this diplomacy as ‘essentially unprincipled’ and even immoral in its opportunistic intent to safeguard American military interests in Ethiopia and the Red Sea region. Offering another critical, but opposing, perspective, the Ethiopian social scientist Dessalegn Rahmato argues that Ethiopia was ill-served by the United States, who dictated agricultural policy in the kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s. In his view, until the 1960s American development officials undervalued Ethiopia’s peasant economy by making large-scale mechanized commercial farming the key to agricultural development. The evidence assembled in this article tells a different and much more nuanced story. In reality, US policy makers never succeeded in controlling Ethiopia’s decision-making, let alone dictated agricultural policy.

V

THE UNITED STATES AND LAND REFORM IN ETHIOPIA

Nowhere was the difficulty of dictating social and economic reform more apparent than over the sensitive issue of land


reform. In Taiwan the Eisenhower administration had pushed very hard for substantive land reform and persuaded the state to compel landlords to give up their landed property. In sharp contrast the same administration sabotaged the Arbenz government’s land reform activities in Guatemala, where the Boston-based United Fruit Company owned huge tracts of land for banana production. Piero Gleijeses and Richard Immerman have documented the irony that the Eisenhower administration orchestrated a military coup against the Guatemalan government, which had carried out what the administration itself had pushed for in Taiwan. US policy in the Ethiopian case was altogether more ambiguous. The Eisenhower administration insisted that land reform was an essential component of American development strategy in Ethiopia, since it wished all Ethiopian peasants to have the opportunity to own land. Nevertheless, it was not prepared to put massive pressure on the imperial government to undertake even a modest land reform. As chargé d’affaires, Joseph Wagner noted in 1959 that a substantive land reform of the nature the United States was promoting in Taiwan had the potential of stripping the Ethiopian emperor of his ‘traditional prerogatives to grant or withdraw land’ as means of punishing or rewarding his subjects. And since the United States had made no commitment to defend the African kingdom militarily, the Eisenhower administration, like Truman’s, chose to tread cautiously on the land reform issue in the interest of maintaining political stability.

The Embassy’s agricultural expert Lloyd Adcock, an agricultural economist from Oklahoma whose opinion on land reform was widely respected in the State Department, captured the American dilemma of negotiating reform and security in Ethiopia succinctly: ‘Land reform, if pushed too fast, can be


58 Joseph J. Wagner, Chargé d’Affaires ad interim, American Embassy, Addis Ababa, to Secretary of State, no. 399, 29 June 1959: USNA, RG 166, FASNR (1961–6), Ethiopia (Forest Products — Wool) to EEC, 1–3, box 93, entry 5. I found the documents I have used here in boxes with date labels that do not correspond with the date of the documents. It is likely this may have been caused by human error in the filing of documents after use by researchers in the US National Archives.
violently revolutionary but will have to come before a modern agricultural industry can be initiated. Too much speed to make a touchdown in this field could mean a disaster’. Adcock’s statement echoed what policy makers in Washington thought about land reform in Ethiopia throughout the 1950s. The US agricultural development credo of this period emphasized large-scale commercial agriculture, but in Ethiopia, American officials concluded that it was impossible without the substantial land reforms which the emperor and the landlord class were unwilling to undertake and which the United States was unable to force upon them. Thus, the United States pursued the kind of paradoxical development diplomacy that the political scientist Jahangir Amuzegar has described, in his critique of the Point Four programme, as the desire to change the living conditions of people with ‘the least . . . interference’ in their social and economic affairs. The evidence suggests that the United States was willing to sacrifice its goal of agrarian reform if this was the only way in which good relations could be maintained with an exceptional ally in the struggle against communism in Africa, and one that was useful in managing race relations at home.

The concerns of the United States rose from the mid 1950s as a movement for land reform gathered pace in Ethiopia, led by socialist-minded university students. The American Embassy in Addis Ababa warned of ‘the strong desire for progress and change’ among Ethiopia’s educated class, who were mostly products of Point Four educational aid. It stressed the possibility that this non-elite social group might attempt to accomplish ‘by revolution’ the needed economic reforms that had been opposed by the top brass of the imperial government. Joseph Simonson’s dispatch of 21 April 1955 to the State Department predicted that the emperor’s government would definitely fall in ‘twenty years’, and in its place might emerge new leaders of humble social origins. He added that without a strong emperor, a government under the new generation of educated Ethiopians ‘would be . . . difficult to


work with’ because of its strong nationalist feelings. As Haile Selassie grew older, and younger educated Ethiopians grew more Marxist, the Eisenhower administration feared that ‘the death of the Emperor, or his incapacitation’ would ‘precipitate a struggle for power’ in Ethiopia that could be worsened by secessionist movements in Eritrea and other provinces. President Eisenhower personally tried to persuade Haile Selassie to outline a clear policy of succession to the imperial throne to avert a succession crisis, but the emperor refused. The attempted overthrow of the emperor’s government in December 1960 by the imperial bodyguard, inspired by some Ethiopians who had been educated on Point Four aid, affirmed the Eisenhower administration’s fears about the dangers of student radicalism in Ethiopia. Perhaps to stem the tide of a Fidel Castro effect in Africa, the outgoing Eisenhower administration used American facilities at the Kagnew installation to provide the Ethiopian army with intelligence information that helped it to quell the coup. The abortive coup, however, merely heightened the American anticipation of a radical political change in Ethiopia — something the United States had not deliberately set in motion and that it was powerless to stop. In the aftermath of the coup attempt, and as the Eisenhower administration approached the end of its term, the State Department conducted relations with Ethiopia with an eye to preparing for an uncertain future. That future eventually came about on 12 September 1974, when the emperor’s government fell and was replaced by a military junta led by young soldiers of modest social background. The American policy of containing communism and preventing a Marxist revolution in a strategic part of the global South had failed. Yet, in contrast to other regions, it would be hard to argue that the Ethiopian revolution was directly caused by US imperialism in that African kingdom.

From the 1960s, a period outside the scope of this article, it became apparent that the US–Ethiopian cold war relationship

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61 Simonson to Secretary of State, ‘Comments on a New Generation of Ethiopians’.
63 David D. Newsom, Diplomacy and the American Democracy (Bloomington, 1988), 118.
was a story of decline. In part, US relations with Ethiopia declined in importance as advances in satellite technology in the 1960s replaced land-based telecommunication systems in cold war intelligence-gathering. The consequence was that the Kagnew installation, a key reason for US strategic interest in Ethiopia, became obsolete. Added to this technological factor was the new political reality in Africa at this period. The decolonization of many states on the continent in the 1960s radically altered US perceptions of Ethiopia’s strategic and symbolic value. Haile Selassie’s kingdom now moved from being exceptional in its sovereignty as a black African monarchy to being just one of dozens of similarly situated, but new, nation states on a rapidly changing continent. Moreover, through his many objections to US policy, Haile Selassie had proved that he was no puppet of the United States. For Haile Selassie’s part, in the course of the 1960s his fears of invasion from a Soviet-armed Republic of Somalia were gradually eclipsed by a new and more palpable threat: the menace of famine in northern Ethiopia. Famine came to represent in the 1960s the greatest challenge to Ethiopia’s domestic security and international image. The now 80-year-old Ethiopian emperor for the first time showed some serious interest in moderate land reform and in limited implementation of Green Revolution commercial agricultural pilot projects to alleviate the growing threat of famine. These mechanized farming initiatives, known as the Minimum Package Programmes, which were undertaken in 1967 with aid from the Swedish government, were experimental in nature and carried out mainly in Chilalo district in south-eastern Ethiopia. Local landlords who stood to gain from them supported these programmes. These package programmes represented the most significant agricultural reform measures beyond Alemaya and Debre Zeit, but happened at a time when a new administration in Washington was already embroiled in the quagmire of Vietnam and the scandals of Watergate. In March 1973 the United States opened a new military base at Diego Garcia, a British possession in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and drew up confidential plans to close the Kagnew installation. In September 1974 Haile Selassie was swept from

65 For more information about the origins and impact of the Minimum Package Programmes, see Rahmato, ‘Peasant Agriculture under the Old Regime’, 170–9; John M. Cohen and Dov Weintraub, Land and Peasants in Imperial Ethiopia: The Social Background to a Revolution (Assen, 1975).
power in a military coup that ushered in a social revolution led by young military officers who, ironically, owed their education and military training to US Point Four technical aid to Ethiopia.

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The story of US development diplomacy in Ethiopia offers some useful lessons for reassessing some of the dominant interpretations of the cold war and post-war social science theories of development. Policies formulated from economic theories and cultural assumptions rarely yield the results their architects imagined, for their outcomes are shaped by social and political context, by unforeseen circumstances and by the unavoidable choices that policy implementation encounters. Ethiopia and the United States always had crucial differences over the meaning of Point Four as a development policy, and over reforms of the kind that the modernization of Ethiopia’s agrarian economy required. Since Washington did not want to jeopardize its strategic interests along the Horn of Africa or offend an African leader whose image pervaded the cultural and race politics of the United States, US officials showed willingness to accommodate Ethiopian opinions when their counterparts in Addis Ababa showed the slightest discontent regarding US policy. Nevertheless, so far as agricultural reform was concerned, the record of the United States was meagre but not wholly negative. Marcus Gordon, Yack Moseley, Milton Wells and the Alemaya College team, together with the Ethiopian peasants with whom they interacted, put a human face on an impersonal agricultural development theory and produced some memorable, if limited, results. The Ethiopian case, then, though in many respects quite untypical, nevertheless dramatized the challenges and contradictions of US cold war policy: the herculean task of balancing ideology, reform, security and racial sensitivity beyond America’s borders. It is thus inaccurate to argue, as Cooper, Westad, Marcus, Dessalegn and White do, that US relations with Ethiopia were just another case of America’s cold war ideological and cultural imperialism in the global South. US policy in Ethiopia suggests rather that trade-offs and compromise were also at stake, and that American policy makers well understood the limits of their ability to force the African kingdom’s political elite to reshape their society in the image of the United States.
Here is a story of cold war diplomacy in which Washington could not impose its will and in which Addis Ababa could refuse to play the role of puppet.

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