

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 421 | Stuart A. Reid: The Lumumba Plot - The Secret History of the CIA, a Cold War Assassination, and Decolonization

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.

I've got an excellent guest today, speaking with Stuart Reed. He's the author of a new book, *The Lumumba Plot, The Secret History of the CIA, and a Cold War assassination*. My goal with these Friday episodes is to kind of look at history and recent books that explore how moments in history can rhyme with our times today. Obviously, a lot of folks are concerned that we're in a second Cold War, this time versus China, instead of the Soviet Union. So, especially as we see debates about how the US and China are going to compete in Africa, it's helpful to look back at how the CIA, the US foreign policy establishment, and other apparatuses of the government factored into previous eras. In this case, the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the early 1960s when Congo became an independent country and many saw it as an actual space of competition for the US and the Soviet Union. Many respects that assassination led to a very obvious disaster, the fate of Congo over the next 30 plus years. So I think as we're looking at this new Cold War today, it's important we look back to history as well too. Hope you all enjoy this conversation and a huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting the work of this podcast.

Stuart Reed, welcome to the realignment. Thank you for having me, Marshall.

So, Stuart, I loved the Lumumba plot. Excellent book, excellent history. The obvious question to ask any historian who is writing a topic that is going to have resonance to issues you're facing today. Why this book? Why this topic? Why now? Beyond the obvious fact that it takes time to publish things. At a narrative level, why do you think this is a relevant book for today?

The fundamental story of my book is about a man being misjudged, Lumumba, Prime Minister of Congo. The Americans really viewed him as potentially pro-Soviet and pro-communist, and in fact, the evidence suggests that he was more pro-American. So I think the lesson there for today is to beware of extreme paranoia, also to not imagine that your geopolitical rivals are 10 feet tall and perfectly capable. In the Cold War in Congo, America thought that the Soviets were extremely competent, extremely active, extremely malicious. In fact, they barely played any role in Congo and viewed it as a faraway place where they couldn't have much influence. So to the extent that there's relevance today, I think it has to do with not imagining that your rival is perfectly capable. And in fact, they're often consumed with their own domestic troubles. And from my perspective, at a broad level, I think, as we could be quote, it was possible. I think the US were, we were the quote unquote, good guys during the Cold War. I think the Cold War was a war worth fighting. That said, at every single level, my takeaway from your book is, you could have a broad mission, which is important and is accurate. But this is just the sort of beyond parody definition of a disaster that could come about when you get paranoid, when you make misjudgments, etc. So before we introduce Lumumba, I love this quote that you offer near the start of the book where you say, Lumumba was a good politician who was a poor statesman. Because that's such a fascinating idea. I think that's going to apply beyond just the Congo. Explain the difference between a good politician and a poor statesman. It's the difference between campaigning and governing. And Lumumba was extremely charismatic. Even his bitterest foes would agree that he had a silver tongue, just really had a way with words. He was an excellent political organizer. He could rally voters, enlist them, run a very competent campaign and got a lot of votes. He changed his, he was a political triangulator.

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He would change his opinion very quickly. It was hard to pin him down on any given issue. All these things made him an effective politician and campaigner. When it came to governing, that's where that didn't work out so well. To be fair, he had an extraordinary series of events to contend with. Within days of the country becoming independent, and he was at the helm as prime minister, there was a mutiny, a province seceded, there was a Belgian military intervention. So he was facing an unprecedented onslaught of chaos. But the very qualities that had served him well in campaigning, flexibility, not being able to be pinned down, et cetera, were seen by some of his Congolese allies and by Western diplomats as a sign of unreliability of him being erratic, et cetera. And you really capture this in the book. I spent a lot of time with founders in the startup and tech space. And a compliment you could offer a founder is this idea of, if you took this person and dropped them in the middle of the Pacific Island, within five years, they'd be king and just totally good to go. It seems like Lumumba is that character. After he is imprisoned for embezzling, he just becomes the biggest beer distributor salesman in a whole portion of the Congo. It's incredibly impressive. I think oftentimes, when I've read about Lumumba beforehand, it doesn't focus as much about the politician and dynamism of him and really treats the poor statesmanship aspect of his personality as kind of the starting point. But I think that gets at the tragedy here. So, okay, so let's do the following now that we've kind of set up one of the central characters here. Let's really give the context across a couple of levels. So this story is really centered in the first half and then the early part of the second half of the 20th century. Introduce us. It's 1960. It's the Eisenhower administration. What's the broader geopolitical context for all the events that we're going to discuss today? So 1960 was called the year of Africa because 17 African colonies became independent countries that year. Suddenly, this giant part of the world was entering normal international political life. And for the United States and the Soviet Union, this was seen as an opportunity. There were these new countries and it wasn't clear which side of the Cold War they would be on. And so both sides viewed it as an opportunity and wanted to win over the new African states. Now, the United States was in a bit of an awkward position in that its allies were European, the former, some current and some former colonial powers, France, Britain, the United Kingdom, and Belgium. And this caused some tension because America was sort of divided between do we support our Belgian ally or do we support the aspirations of the Congolese people? And that same dilemma was repeated across the continent. These tensions sort of came to a head in the Congo crisis. And it was a time when the Cold War was heating up and it really seemed to America as if every country had to pick a side. There was neutrality, was suspicious, non-aligned nature, was not really acceptable. And I think that was sort of the key error that America made in Congo was that it refused to accept that a country could choose its own course and not be pro-Soviet and not be pro-American either. And I think what's also helpful is for you to establish what was the Congo as a country, because there's this portion of the book where you describe Mobutu, Joseph Mobutu, who obviously is an important figure in the future of the Congo. He travels to a province that you say is, quote, the size of Japan. It's just a casual throwaway line. And that kind of gets to the scale. We all know the point that oftentimes our maps

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don't accurately reflect the scale of Africa, which means we are not reflecting the scale of the Congo. Describe the Congo as a country. So it's massive, the size of Western Europe. And you're right, the Mercator projection sort of downplays countries close to the equator, their size, and makes ones further north look larger. So it's the size of Western Europe. At the time, there were six provinces. And it was a fiction in a way. It had been created. The boundaries were drawn by Belgians sitting in Europe during the carving up of Africa. So it contained hundreds of different ethnic groups to get to one side of the country, to another was a long flight. And it had different cities. And these were not particularly well connected during Belgian colonial rule, which was one reason that a Congolese political elite had difficulty forming the other being that Belgium actively tried to prevent it. So it's this massive country, many different ethnic, ethno-linguistic groups and languages. And its geography really varies on a continental scale. There are mountains in the east, savanna, thick tropical forest. So the scale cannot be overstated. Something I'd love to talk through with you. Because once again, because you're giving, this is a narrative history book rather than a set of policy analysis, you're telling the story, but I'd love to hear what you think about some of the dilemmas. So dilemma number one, if we're going to compare colonial empires across not only like Africa, but Asia, Latin America, et cetera, especially in the 20th century, I'd say I would personally rank the Belgians towards the bottom in terms of not only the good faith nature of the project, but educating the people in the country. Because you know, say what you want about the British and India, but you did have an Indian elite that went to Oxford and were educating, were in many ways brought into the society. You have this line, we say that there are like 20 Congolese who have even gone into some form of higher education. And one of those who snuck through was half white. So it was kind of like even a technicality. So that's just a baseline level of their responsibility. So I guess what I'm kind of getting at here is people are going to read this story. And on the one hand, they're going to say to themselves, okay, when the Congolese go to the Belgians and they say, hey, we need to plan for independence and the Belgians say, okay, that sounds great, we'll do something that lets you free in 1980. On the one hand, you're going to say to yourself like, okay, that's bad faith, that's unfair. But considering how terrible everything gets within literally a day, my reaction is, ooh, was there like an in between that could have been formed? Was there a maybe the king of Belgium is still the head of state for 10 years? Could there have been like good faith points of like forward movement? Could the UN serve as sort of like a custodian of like the relationships kind of standing in like, how do you think about that dynamic? Yeah, I mean, the fundamental problem was that the Belgians refused to accept that their colony would become independent until way too late. So they started the process of transitioning Congo far too late and did next to nothing to actually prepare it. So you hinted at this, but in 1955, there was a Belgian academic who released a plan called the 30 year plan for the independence of the Belgian Congo, the idea being that by 1985, it would finally be ready to be independent. He almost lost his job because that was seen as way too radical, way too fast, 30 years was far too short a period of time to transition Congo. So that tells you just how, you know, their view, they were refusing to accept reality, the winds of change were blowing across Africa, but they still imagined that they could hold on to their colony for more than 30 years. Things changed really quickly in the late 1950s. There was a massive riot in the capital of Congo, Leopoldville,

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and the Belgians were sort of looking what was happening with the French in Algeria and thought, okay, we need to offload our colony as quickly as possible. This is not sustainable. They read the writing on the wall, but they did very little planning. And as you mentioned, there was no Belgian excuse me, no Congolese political elite education was tightly restricted only in I think 1956 or 57. Did they open a university that was open to Congolese in the military? There were no Congolese officers. So that was a big cause of that. That was the initial spark of the crisis after independence. There was a mutiny where the black rank and file revolted against their white Belgian officers. So the key detail, even after there was a government of transition, the Belgian white officers in the force public remained in charge, correct?

Exactly, which, you know, as you can imagine, the black rank and file were none too excited about to think, okay, our country's free, but I'm still saluting my, you know, former at this point colonial masters. So that was the immediate spark that led to all the chaos that would follow. I guess the question is, I'm kind of wondering this about the white force public officers at the start. What was their self conception? And what was the self conception of the whites who remained in Congo after the transition? So did they think that they were Congolese citizens?

Are they akin to like white South Africans after the transition away from apartheid? Like, what was their self conception? They very much still identified as Belgian. And I think that points to sort of one of the broader problems here, which was that Belgium imagined it could, it finally accepted that it had to agree to independence for Congo. But the version of independence that had imagined still had a lot of Belgian control. This was all, they hashed out the details of independence at a conference at the beginning of 1960, where they decided that independence would come in June 1960. And one of the things the Belgians still imagined, just to give you a sense of what they were thinking, was that there would be Belgians serving as ambassadors for Congo in other countries. So the Congolese ambassador to Japan or whatever would be a Belgian citizen. That was how they imagined it. That changed as the date neared. But with respect to the military that there were still Belgian officers. So there was a real reluctance to truly let go.

And something I'm interested in, especially if we're talking about the decolonization moment, it seems as if, because once again, I think empire on a couple of different levels is immoral, caused all these different problems. But if we're looking at these decolonization efforts, you see contrasting conceptions of empire. So for example, the French, the French, one of the means where they attempt to keep the French empire together, is they let Africans like vote and send representatives to the French parliament. The British obviously have this broader conception of the British empire. The French have the civilizing, I'm not going to try to pronounce it, but like them civilatrice and everything like that. It seems as if the Belgians and probably I'd say that the fact that the relationship between Belgium and Congo was still just specifically commercial. They just had zero soft power or just like attraction. I was thinking myself and thinking like, okay, like real talk, like I would understand the idea of being a Ghanaian and wanting Queen Elizabeth to remain my head of state.

I could imagine being an African and wanting to say, hey, actually, I wouldn't like to remain a part of the broader French civilization. I don't know what at all the Belgians were offering in the first place. So I'd love to hear what you think about that.

I think you've hit the nail on the head. There was no, I mean, there was, they had Catholic

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missionaries there who had their own civilizing mission. But I think the whole strategy toward the Congo was, it was one about economic exploitation. So you didn't need to build deep domestic political institutions and they didn't. And therefore, there was a very thin level of Congolese involvement in everything. It was in the French colonies, there were cases of African governor generals ruling over various territories. That was something you'd never have in Congo. There were no Congolese doctors, no Congolese lawyers or one, as you mentioned earlier, someone whose father was Italian and sort of slipped through the cracks. So the whole strategy was they talked about no elites, no problems, meaning if you prevent the development of a Congolese elite, then no one will be agitating for independence and will get to just keep this colony intact forever and ever. Of course, that didn't work and the innate desire for self-rule eventually could not be stopped. And what's so interesting about that is the no elites, no problem thing only takes you so far as a metric. So for example, think of then Indochina within the French Empire, you have elites, educated persons like Ho Chi Minh, who are capable of going to the Treaty of Versailles negotiations, and then you're able to advocate. And that obviously leads into civil war and breaking away. And it's kind of interesting that you didn't have the prevention of the creation of an elite and a broader... On the one hand, it helped them manage. You're not having the country fall apart into a civil war. While the Belgians are still in charge, but it still leads to the disastrous outcome where everyone leads too. So it's kind of an interesting... If you just kind of talk it out, it seems very ineffective. Okay, so another question I want to ask is, interestingly enough, as the Congolese are debating what the post-Belgian country are going to look like, there's a debate about federalism. And actually, and this is probably the first time, I'd love to hear if you've heard of this in any other case, where you see a nation positively citing the Articles of Confederation as a model. That's such a funny line where they're like, you know, like the Articles of Confederation could serve as a model for how you could organize post-Belgian Congo. And then you have an American, a half-Black American who worked for the UN say, you know, that kind of was a total disaster on 15 different levels. Everyone who's paid attention in high school knows this story. And the Congolese were still kind of intrigued by it. So that was just sort of a funny aside. But I guess the whole point is hearing how badly everything turned out in Congo, keeping it together as a broad country, would the federal, even the weak national government Articles of Confederation model, have been a better choice given the incoherence of a Congo besides of the Western of Europe? Yeah, so they, at this roundtable before independence, they sort of split the difference in a way between having a completely unitary system with a very strong central government and the provinces all answering to the central government. Between that and on the other hand, a truly federal model, for instance, the type that Nigeria originally adapted. Instead, they had this sort of worst of both world situation where you had a strong central government, but you also had a lot of power residing with the provinces. They had their own provincial legislatures, which elected leaders and sent representatives to the capital. So there was always this tension built into the system between the center and the provinces. It's, you know, an interesting academic question of whether it would have been better for Congo to have a more federal system. Part of the thinking on many Congolese, on the part of many Congolese, including Patrice Lumumba himself, was that

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Belgians had run it in this very unitary top-down system. And so the logic was, well, let's just keep that as it is and carry it forward. The counter argument, of course, was that it was a vast nation, extremely diverse. People on one side of the country had little interest in being ruled by people on the other side of the country. So there was this, you know, in a lot of colonies, there was a question about what type of system we should have after independence.

In Congo, it was an especially important question because of the massive size of the country.

So I guess the real question here then, and this gets to the opening question about statesmanship versus politics. What choices did Lumumba have right as independence began? You tell the story of he

went to the white general in charge of the forced public and said, hey, I think there's a problem here. And the general arrogantly said, no, it's fine. 75 years of history. This is the only functioning institution in the country. Therefore, we're going to go, obviously, they're going to revolt the next day. But I guess the question would be what could have been done the day before? Because this is how

quickly everything collapses. So you kind of get into the question about what could a more statesmanlike Lumumba have done? I think because the mutiny happened, the mutiny happened July 5th, independence was June 30th. I think in those five days, there was probably nothing Lumumba really could have done to prevent disaster. And it wasn't necessarily obvious that disaster was happening. Some people saw it, others didn't. Really, you'd have to go back further and think about the months leading up to independence where the soldiers were disgruntled. They still were poorly paid. There was no plan for Africanizing the military. Where Lumumba's choices came in, I think, was later. After the mutiny at the height of the crisis, he calls in the United Nations. He's frustrated that they're unable to restore order and then goes to the US, gets rebuffed by them, then turns to the Soviets. And that's where I think Lumumba has much more agency. In the initial period of five days, right before the mutiny, there's probably very little he could have done to avoid that.

And that's what's so interesting here, because I think a key theme of a deep reading of the first few chapters is just the idea that this is just so built in. There are so many structural choices, decades in the making that never were legible, because it was kind of interesting, because once again, this is the testament to how you write the book. I think you helped me develop a sense of empathy towards the dynamics. So one of the things that Lumumba tries to propose,

once the forced public begins rioting, is we're going to promote everyone in the military. And you're just thinking about this. You're like, okay, that's kind of crazy. That's kind of random.

A, obviously, that wouldn't work. Doesn't seem justifiable. But then you then point out a few sentences later, the logic is you've been discriminated against your entire military career.

Therefore, by promoting everyone, it's a recognition of things are fair now. We are recognizing you, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But once again, too little, too late, not enough, given the actual stakes we're discussing here.

Yeah. And he also disbands the white Belgian officer corps there on the way out, which

some sort of transition plan for that should have been made before independence, obviously.

And I think they had plans to train Congolese soldiers to move up the ranks. But the schedule

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was so slow, it was like only in 1965 would the first graduates of a Belgian military academy finally be ready. So again, the timetable was just all off.

Did the Belgians want independence to fail?

I think no. They viewed their colony as this jewel in the crown, an impressive achievement.

And so their preferred version would have been a successful Congo. However, it would have been one that still retained very close links to Belgium, and that Belgium still have a lot of influence and control over. But to give you one example, so on July 11th, the crisis gets even worse when the mineral rich province of Katanga announces its secession and breaks free. And the Belgians end up supporting that. But just weeks earlier, they had been very opposed to any semblance

of Katangan independence because they thought that would break up their beautiful colonial creation,

and it would be an embarrassment to not have an intact. Once the chaos began, they shifted gears and thought, okay, well, this is our last toehold of influence in the country. But they would have preferred that there had been no crisis, but their actions before independence in the months and years and decades before independence really set it up for a crisis.

And I think another thing I appreciated in your telling of the story is your obvious featuring of the United Nations as an institution. Because I think if we're looking at crises today, and it's not that the UN isn't taken seriously, it's that even if it were taken seriously, it just wouldn't really matter. There's no presumption that the Gaza war is going to be resolved at the UN or that the Secretary General could show up and be treated as this figure who could adjudicate the UN that we're encountering. It's just an entirely different UN than our modern self-conception. Obviously, at the start of the 50s decade, UN forces led by the US are obviously fighting in the Korean War. Obviously, that's because the Soviets were boycotting. But once again, that's still a different conception of the UN. Can you introduce the UN to listeners? Because once again, this is such a different conception of this post-war institution in comparison to most of our other ones which have remained relatively, whether they work or not, relatively consistent since World War II. Yeah. Time traveling into 1960 was fascinating for just the reason you say, because the UN is an entirely different animal at that point. It's way more relevant. It's seen as powerful. The Secretary General, Doug Hommersheld, is seen as an esteemed diplomat to the world's

problem solver. What the UN Security Council did yesterday would be on the front page of the New York Times the next day. It was at the center of the Cold War in many ways.

Today, of course, it's very much a reduced organization. I think a few things were going on.

One, it was new. It had been founded in 1946, and so it was still quite young.

Two, what was then called the Third World, today the Global South, had not really joined the organization en masse. That actually started to change in 1960 itself when you have these 17 African nations becoming independent. It was still dominated by the big powers and European countries. The membership changed over time and made it more of an unwieldy organization that was

less sort of a vehicle for the advanced industrial nations. The other thing was that Doug Hommersheld

himself really turned the Secretary General position into this unique power center and

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sort of someone who had moral and diplomatic authority. He lost much of that in the Congo crisis. The esteem and capital that the UN had built up since its founding, Hommersheld spent a lot of that in the Congo crisis by sending this massive peacekeeping operation there by being one of the main players hoping to resolve the crisis. But then that mission was really deemed a failure and the UN never again would try anything so ambitious.

And this takes us back to Lumumba. So to your point, his success as a politician, he's wily, he's able to be all things to all people, many respects, and that serves him well in a fractious, complicated, frankly, far too large country. It seems that the ideal, if you were him, would have been kind of the path that a country like India takes.

You know, this the second world, this like, you know, we're neutral, we have our own interests.

Why was that not a sustainable approach to Congolese foreign policy moving forward?

Well, Lumumba certainly thought it was, and that's exactly what he wanted to sort of chart his own course. As he said time and time again, you know, I've just been fighting the Belgian colonialists for so long, I'm not going to turn around and invite in the Soviets to dominate or the Americans to dominate. So he thought he could, he thought it was obvious that, of course, he wouldn't accept foreign domination. That was his, you know, the antithesis of his entire political project. The problem, however, I would say is it was really on the American side, which is that they did not understand third world nationalism. They specifically did not understand Lumumba, who, you know, rubbed a lot of American officials the

wrong way. And they, you know, he flies to New York, meets with Homer Schold, asks for the UN to finally enter the breakaway province of Katanga, which it hasn't yet done. He's rebuffed by Homer Schold. He goes to DC, wants to meet with President Eisenhower, Eisenhower's out of town. So he gets

a meeting at the State Department. He asks for all sorts of military aid direct by bilateral assistance, again, gets rebuffed. And in the, while he's in DC, he even gives a press conference where he calls on the United States to send American troops to Congo. So that tells you, you know, that's not something that a pro-Soviet politician would do. Yet, when he goes back to Congo, he starts, you know, in the American eyes, sort of playing footsie with the Soviets, asking them to watch the situation closely, and then asks for military aid, which they start providing. But that only happened after he knocked at the UN's door first, and then America's door.

I'm kind of interested in, so obviously, as you recount in the book, at various points, during his political campaigning, he goes to the Soviets for material aid, just campaign funds, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. There are always rumors about foreign support from him.

But I'm curious, beyond just those meetings, why the assumption was that he was a communist, in the sense that looking at Congolese society, just communism, capitalism, there's not, these aren't relevant topics in conversations. There isn't a proletariat. There aren't landowners, there's anti-colonialism. But I guess they just, anti-colonialism, just read as like communistic, and therefore the error happened there. But I'd love to hear about that.

So the Soviets themselves viewed Congo as a place where there were poor prospects for communism,

because it was a heavily Catholic country, and as you said, the sort of structure didn't work for



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their ideology to be imported. So they viewed it very skeptically, it was sort of a faraway place that would naturally be more pro-western in the Soviets' view. That's what they thought. And so when Lumumba is denied aid by the Americans, Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet premier himself, is dumbfounded, and he bangs his fist on the table and says, really, are the Americans that stupid? Why are they turning him away? So also another data point, Lumumba, after independence, entrusted Congo's entire economic future to an American entrepreneur. He struck a massive deal with him for Congo's hydroelectric, hydroelectric, and mineral resources that ended up falling apart. But it shows that he had these naturally pro-American inclinations, I would argue. But when he turned to the Soviets, that set off alarm bells in Washington within the CIA, particularly Larry Devlin, the station chief in Congo, writes this cable saying, Congo is experiencing a classic communist takeover. So everything just viewed through these paranoid Cold War lenses meant that his appeal to the Soviets and his advisor, him having somewhat leftist advisors, all that painted this picture in the Americans' view that Lumumba was about to turn Congo red. There were some who thought he was communist or pro-Soviet. The more sophisticated critique was that he himself was not that, but he was so erratic and willing to be used that he would end up opening the Congo to Soviet influence, even if he himself was not naturally inclined toward it. And I think this gets to Nikita Khrushchev's confusion. If that's true, then support him first. That's the conclusion with the more sophisticated critique. Something you say, and this I think applies to debates about foreign policy in Africa, the US, China, et cetera, at an ideological level, you point out that within the self-conception of the US and the Soviet Union, the US saw itself as offering freedom, the Soviet Southern Socialist was offering justice, which is a little different than just the traditional communism capitalism dynamic. So can you explain the good faith articulation of what both sides meant by that? And then what's the more complicated downside to both articulations? Because I would not particularly describe the Soviet Union of Stalin, which was very recently put as a nation of justice. And then there are obviously many ways the United States was not a nation of freedom, especially if you're a black person. So I'd love for you to articulate that. Yeah. So that idea comes from the historian Arne Westad's book, *The Global Cold War*. And as you suggest, it was less about the reality of each society and more about their self-image and what they saw themselves as promoting. So for America, it's capitalism, democracy. For the Soviets, it's economic justice, equality, again, on paper. And so the Soviets in particular saw a natural alignment with the Third World, because these were countries that had been victimized by Western colonial powers and sort of anti-colonialism, it was thought would grow, you know, gel nicely with anti-Westernism and, you know, therefore pro-Soviet views. This didn't work in every country in Congo is a good example, because I think, I mean, Lumumba was very anti-Belgian, of course, because he had been the personal victim of much Belgian abuse, but he was not anti-American. So was he anti-Western? Well, it depends which Western country you're talking about. And I think that was, again, part of the problem that the Americans couldn't sort of separate, you know, liking America and hating Belgium that were

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perfectly acceptable positions for Lumumba to hold. So there was this coating of him on the American side as unreliable and not friendly. And I think they really misjudged him at the end of the day. Something I'm curious about is how does this, so given all the context we've established, how, actually, you know, I want to steal, man, something I'm curious what you think about this. So we could obviously refer to this as Cold War paranoia, which is obviously playing a part. But on the other hand, you have 17 new African countries emerging. I think if there is a case for a domino theory, it's probably the strongest intellectually in this category of, like, look, you have always new nations, the Overton window has been expanded to the absolute maximum. If the model for decolonization is Soviet, is communistic, this is going to clearly spread in a way that I think was a little less serious than the Vietnamese or the Asian example. So what would you say to someone who's articulating it that way? Well, I think there was no evidence that the Congolese people were particularly attracted by the Soviet model or attracted by communism. And in fact, there's very little evidence that the Soviets themselves were particularly active in Congo. So that's the key point. So it's one thing if you have a bunch of, you know, Soviet planes dropping all the way across Africa, spreading the good word, but that's not what's happening then. One of the interesting things was with the end of the Cold War, the Soviet archives opened up, and it turns out there was very little on Congo there because they didn't view it as a central concern. It was a place they could talk about on the UN Security Council floor and score propaganda points, but it was not a country where they thought they could have a massive influence. And when they were asked by Lumumba for military aid, they were annoyed by that fact. They wish they didn't have to give some token aid, which they ended up, you know, starting the process of giving.

So then here's the question then, how does everything we just described lead to an assassination, which seems just like a dramatic beyond the debate about a dramatic, not just like an overreaction, but something that led to actual disaster over the next 30, 40, 50 years to this day, even. So Lumumba's called in the UN to put down the crisis. It's not working. He goes to the US, he's rebuffed, he goes to the Soviets, that sets off alarm bells in the CIA, and so begins this sort of out of a science, out of a spy fiction movie assassination plot where the CIA sends vials of poison to Congo, tries to have the station chief in Congo put it in Lumumba's food or toothpaste. That plot ends up fizzling and is not what kills Lumumba. What happens is something else. Lumumba's fired by the president of Congo in this legally dubious maneuver. Lumumba turns around and says that he's firing the president. So both top leaders have announced that they've fired the other. And into the void, into that stalemate steps a man named Joseph Mobutu, who Lumumba had put him in charge of the military. He was a friend and mentee of Lumumba's and had some military experience. So Lumumba makes him in charge of the army and Mobutu then announces- The first black officer, which is the key detail. So as he's made a colonel, he's the, so that's that there's a, this man means quite a lot beyond just like that title. He represents the Africanization of the army. And so he takes power in a coup and then waffles a bit about whether he's going to favor the president, a man named Joseph Kasavubu, or Prime Minister Lumumba. Journalists call him the hamlet of the Congo at this point because he can't make up his mind. Does he act against his longtime friend? Or does he favor the seemingly more pro-western president? He ends up throwing Lumumba under house arrest. And that is

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actually

why the, the poisoning plot doesn't work because the CIA station chief can't get access to Lumumba's

house. It's guarded by troops. Lumumba ends up making a very daring and fateful decision to escape house arrest. He slips out. He hides under the feet of his domestic staff as they're driving out during a tropical rainstorm. And he's caught days later with CIA help, which has helped Mobutu arrange a search party. And then Lumumba is sent to a military prison where it's hoped he, you know,

can't escape from that. And this is December 1960. And the timing here matters because that's when the Eisenhower administration was on its way out and the Kennedy administration was about to

come in. And there was a real sense on the ground in Congo that Kennedy would be more pro-Lumumba

than Eisenhower had been. And there was this fear that Lumumba might be released from jail and restored as prime minister. And for Mobutu, who had taken charge in his military coup, that would have meant, you know, the end of his being in power. And for the CIA on the ground, that would have been, you know, a repudiation of their everything they stood for. So in January 1961, Mobutu decides to send Lumumba away to a province where he will certainly die. Everyone knows that sending him to one of these two provinces will result in his death. And he and his circle inform the CIA station chief about this, Larry Devlin. And what does he do?

Two things. One, he doesn't tell Mobutu to put the brakes on this transfer. So he sort of, he greenlights sending Lumumba away to his death. And two, because of the transition going on in Washington, he doesn't tell headquarters what's about to happen because he worries that he'll be told, Hey, put the brakes on this. It's a presidential transition. We can't have big new policies happening. We can't. This is a matter for the new administration. And so on January 17th, 1961, Lumumba's flown to Katanga and shot dead hours after after landing. And Kennedy was inaugurated three days later. No, this is just fascinating, because there's been a lot of even non-conspiracy-minded work about how literally, in the case of what you just said, out of control as CIA was during the early Cold War period, you could extend this into everything from the Bay of Pigs to the failed and increasingly silly assassination plots against Fidel Castro, obviously. I'm just curious, studying this history, writing this book, what lessons did you take about how a country, a democracy specifically needs to run an intelligence service? Because I think too often, and this is my beef with one of the conspiracy talk, like a country is going to have an intelligence service. So the lesson here cannot be seen. This is why you can't have like a deep state that isn't quite it, but there actually is still something there. And I'm curious what you think that something there is. So this was the real Wild West days of the CIA. You had Alan Dulles in charge as CIA director. By then, his brother, John Foster Dulles, who had been Secretary of State, he had died, and Christian Herter was Secretary of State. But it was this, the Eisenhower era was probably the height of the CIA's power, and there was basically zero oversight over it. I think some of that changed with the Bay of Pigs, which was also laid at the feet of Alan Dulles, and he was eventually fired for that. But in this Eisenhower era, in particular, the CIA was doing its own thing. Now, I should note that they're, in the case of the Lumumba operation, it was acting at the behest of President

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Eisenhower. There's this sort of famous August 18, 1960 meeting where Eisenhower says something to the effect of, he looks at Alan Dulles and says something to the effect of, you know, get rid of Lumumba physically. The exact words are lost to history, but the note taker for the meeting would later testify to the church committee about this. And I also, when I went to the Eisenhower library, I found these handwritten notes from the meeting that no one else so far as I know had ever looked at, and they had a State Department official wrote the word Lumumba and then a big X next to his name. So, you know, that could mean a lot of things, but it could also mean one particular thing. So the CIA was, in a sense, you know, following orders in this case. I think the record of covert action in the 50s and 60s is not a particularly great record. And so there's this odd tension, though, in the events I described between incompetence and competence. So on the one hand, the CIA was bumbling, you know, had all sorts of harebrained schemes and sent two CIA agents to the Congo who were European criminals. And they didn't know, each didn't know about the other, but they ended up running into each other at a bar and discovering they're both working for the CIA. So there's a lot of, you know, incompetence and bumbling. On the other hand, it made really consequential decisions that

led to Lumumba's death and the propping up of Mobutu, the CIA backed the coup in which he took over. So both of these things are true. So in this last section, we should really just talk about the consequences of all this. So, you know, what does Mobutu, what does he turn into? And how

do these sets of decisions really impact how devastating the experience as a Congolese has frankly just been ever since? So Mobutu takes charge in this September 1960 coup with American encouragement. CIA station chief is delivering him briefcases of cash. He's receiving a CIA stipend until the mid to late 1960s. And he runs the country until 1997, 30 plus years. He is extremely kleptocratic, repressive. Ironically, not as pro-American as the Americans would have hoped. He invited in North Korean military advisors at one point. He kicked out two American ambassadors for being insufficiently respectful. But in the Cold War, he was pro-Western dictator. And so in that sense, the CIA viewed what happened in Congo as a success,

you know, you'd gotten rid of this potentially pro-Soviet leader, installed a nice, reliable pro-American dictator. The problem, of course, is the Congolese people were the ones who paid the price for that. And you had not even, you know, a lost three decades, but I would say three decades of reversal and regression and decline. And in 1996, 1997, the bottom falls out. Mobutu Zaire, as he had renamed the country, completely collapses. There's this rebel invasion and Mobutu himself, you know, flees the country as his own presidential guards take potshots at his plane. And then he dies not that long afterward of cancer. And that collapse of Zaire kicked off one of the deadliest civil wars in recent memories anywhere from two to five million people died, which is, you know, the range itself tells you how deadly and confused it was. And you can trace that collapse to the fact that a hollow regime had been supported for so long by the West. And I think the idea was, at any given point, the safe, stable thing to do is to support Mobutu. But if you take a longer timeframe and think about the country's long-term stability and the well-being of its people, it was a wrongheaded decision. And I guess the closing question here is actually, I'm actually just kind of curious, right? Because I'm someone who tends to

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accept and appreciate the language and framework of, you know, we're in Cold War Two, but I think a reading of this book is that frameworks and models actually really matter in terms of the implications what they suggest. Because once again, you're kind of, we're looking at this all in hindsight, knowing what we know now, but obviously frameworks around the Cold War played a role in some of the bad decisions that were made here. So what do you think about just the language of Cold War Two, having written a book about some of the least defensible aspects of American policy during Cold War One? Yeah, I mean, I think the label, nothing in history is a perfect analogy, but the similarities are striking. You have a massive geopolitical rivalry today between the United States and its allies and Russia, China, and it's, you know, far fewer number of allies. You have the division of the world into sort of three blocks. The, you know, what used to be called the first world, second world, third world is now, you know, the West Plus, the China, Russia axis, and the global south. So those similarities are there. Differences, of course, you know, China and the US are far more economically intertwined than the US

and the Soviet Union were. But I think the lesson of my book, one lesson is, you know, don't imagine that your enemy is 10 feet tall and perfectly competent. That's one thing. And the other is to not be obsessed with the way a, you know, then third world, now global South country allies itself. It probably just wants to focus on its own development and steer clear of the wider geopolitical rivalry. And I don't think we need to make them choose. And in fact, you know, one lesson of the Cold War is to stand back and let your enemy eventually collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. And you don't have to contain it in every single place and every single country. And that was, you know, not the thinking at the time. It was, it mattered who ran Congo. Why did it matter who ran Congo? It was not a strategically important country to the United States. It just was focused on its own politics and its own development. But the United States refused to accept that. And I guess the next advice question would be, and this is why Lumumba is a deeply sympathetic, but obviously very, very flawed character in the sense that you're just reading this book and you're like, oh, you're pushing it like Wiley. Wiley is just like the perfect, he just played. And once again, he was, you know, assassinated at our behestal, not meaning to besmirch him from the grave, obviously, but he played too many games. And he clearly played too many games. So a takeaway I would just have is like, you could be neutral, but don't try to play games, I guess. But what would your advice be for the Global South from his lesson? Because also we don't like to note too, though, like it's not as if this isn't the 50s and 60s. So it's not as if we're like, assassinating a leader if they don't, if they like take a Chinese mining deal. So I think that's important to note. But what's kind of like the advice about finding yourself between two super power blocks? Yeah, I think you're right in that, you know, Lumumba, obviously, it goes without saying did not deserve his death and what happened to him was a tragedy. But he did have agency and he did make decisions that could have been made differently and that another leader might have made. You know, he himself was naive about the Cold War, I think he really didn't see it. That was a foreign concept. In one of his allies, Thomas Kansa said, you know, in Congo, there was no idea of the Cold War. This was a foreign idea that was imported to us. Lumumba himself said, for the Congo, there are no blocks. Of course, there were real blocks, and he should have known that and it would have helped him to know that. So without putting the blame on him, which is I don't think where it belongs, I guess

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the implication is recognize that blocks exist and countries do want you to choose and so tread carefully. And again, I don't, you know, he should have been allowed to not pick a side, but it would have helped him had he known more that it was demanded of him to pick a side. And once again, I think I want listeners to take you very literally when you talk about him not understanding the Cold War, because this is, once again, the tragedy of how awful the Belgian system was, like the highest form of education that he achieved was like the postal school. But you clearly can hear this and in our conversation, read this on the page, he's a very smart, ambitious, well-motivated man. He even was one of the elevated Congolese, I'm not going to do the French word, that were given benefits and recognized for their talents. And despite all that, he just literally was not educated and was as a non-educated, because as you know, it's very easiest to say, oh, actually, if we were only experts in this, this or that, but like he actually just did not know things that a person, because think of this way, like think of like statesman challenge, we started the episode by besmirching his statesmanship. If we were to put on the list of like post-World War II statesmanship challenges, Congo 1960 is near the top when it comes to difficulties, right? Like you could take an FDR or Winston Churchill, and we could accept that they probably wouldn't have been able to pull us off either here in the circumstances, but the lack of education certainly didn't help. And yeah, LaMumba was brilliant by all accounts. He was a voracious reader. And what is so remarkable

is how he was an autodidact, because he had to be. There were no educational opportunities available to him. So he took correspondence courses in French and joined a library. He was really a self-made man and achieved as much intellectually as he could have. And part of his naivete, perhaps, was the result of education. But I think, you know, it's important not to put too much a point on that, because there were other Congolese politicians who had a more sophisticated understanding of the Cold War and who were more suave with the Western diplomats, Mabututu being a

great example, who, you know, he didn't go to university either, but he knew how to play Kate Western officials. He developed a reputation as a moderate and so forth. So some of this, I think, was LaMumba's back to where we started, his sort of him being a political animal and caring about winning over a crowd, winning over voters, as opposed to being a statesman who could, you know, triangulate between the powers and know when to not speak and know when to reassure and that sort of thing. Last question. I found myself just, what's frustrating about the early 21st century is it feels as if we've exhausted whatever imagination or possibility could exist when it comes to the way the world is shaped. And just reading your book, you know, you talk about how,

you know, there are 77 countries in the world with the African independence movement. You had 17 new countries and they literally had to tear up the carpet and they had to add more stakes for flags outside. We just don't live in a moment like that. So I just found myself thinking like, wow, like, so many of our problems today are about handling the world like as it is where everything's priced in, but you're writing about a moment where there are just all these choices and social constructions are at their peak in the sense that you could shape things differently. What was it like just to read about and study and write about a period like that? Because it's just, to your point about the UN, this is like another thing that's just sort of inconceivable from a

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2023 perspective. Yeah, well, there's that saying that the past is a foreign country and that proved to be true. I mean, one of the things that surprised me also was that the Congo crisis was front page news every day of the New York Times in the summer of 1960. And then I had never heard of it afterwards, basically, didn't learn anything about it in school. And so I think writing it, you really have to dispense with your current day conception of the world, as you said, and go back to a totally different time to give you just one example of how different things were. Eisenhower, in his memoir, wrote that he thought that the new African nations should not have been allowed to join the United Nations, which is, you know, preposterous idea today, but represented clearly a actual strain of thinking back then. So it was, you know, so much was different. And it was the world we're living in now, in many ways, was created in that post war period.

Well said, Stuart. Thank you so much for joining me on the realignment. Like I said, I really recommend

this book to everyone who's interested just in history in general, but I think it's also just a fun and really interesting read that will get you thinking about challenges today.

Thanks, Marshall.

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