

BOOK REVIEW

Benjamin Talton. *In This Land of Plenty: Mickey Leland and Africa in American Politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 212 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$45.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9780812251470.

This masterful work underscores how a deeply talented historian can artfully weave a tapestry of transnational diasporic history, one that balances African history and U.S. history, individual stories and broad historical currents, clashes of Cold War triumphalism and human rights activism, and transnational networks and domestic politics, all while returning the important, remarkable story of U.S. Congressman Mickey Leland to our collective understanding.

As a student and activist at Texas Southern University, then as a young man making his way into politics, Leland intellectually and visually offered a more radical, activist vision of the present and possible future. Completing his master's degree in clinical pharmacy in 1970, with the encouragement and financial support of Houston's leading philanthropist couple, Leland soon traveled to East Africa. Part of the wave of 1960s and 1970s Black internationalists, Leland's time in Julius Nyerere's Tanzania proved especially influential. Returning to Houston, in short order Leland won election to the Texas State Legislature and, upon Barbara Jordan's retirement, to the seat in the U.S. Congress previously held by her.

Proudly sporting his Afro and dashikis, Leland carried the ideals of Black Power activism of the 1960s and early 1970s into the halls of Congress and in support of international causes. Talton sees Leland as "emblematic of the afterlife of international radicalism in the United States" (3).

Paralleling Leland's own focus, Talton emphasizes Leland's connections with Ethiopia while deftly weaving throughout the book Leland's engagement with the greater Horn of Africa countries and broader Africa. One of the many outstanding attributes of this work is providing a lens that highlights African contexts and re-frames Western understandings. For instance, Talton uses poetry in Ethiopia that reflects a "tenacious quest to endure" to contrast with Western narratives of famine as "a uniquely African tragedy, with the people and governments of the West as natural, logical redeemers" (82–83). Leland himself had to navigate the highly political landscapes of

humanitarian aid on both continents, including both the Reagan administration in the U.S. and the Mengistu regime in Ethiopia. Talton skillfully contextualizes Leland's activities, including his calls for dialogue with the Mengistu government.

Leland found that conservative political opponents used his reluctance to openly critique Mengistu against him when it came to debates over "constructive engagement" and sanctions against South Africa. Talton's important chapter on Leland's role in the 1980s anti-apartheid efforts in America helps situate Leland in the constellation of activists, inside halls of Congress and outside on the streets, that finally overcame Reagan's objections and veto pen to move the United States toward stronger action against the white supremacist regime in Pretoria.


Talton wonderfully contextualizes and explains, while bringing to life Leland's battles and personal journey, from his pursuit of radical reforms in the United States to his seeking to harness the nation's wealth for the greater world good. The potential to use such wealth for the long-term development and prosperity of some of the world's most disadvantaged regions remained a north star as Leland pursued his Black internationalism while skillfully navigating levers of power to advance his objectives. In the 1980s, Leland and fellow Black internationalists in Congress united to reach new heights of influence on U.S. policy toward Africa. Through his charismatic personal diplomacy and exhausting work, Leland helped move humanitarian relief and African sovereignty to higher status in U.S. policy. Ultimately, though, before his death he could not shift the overall paradigm of policy toward the Global South. Ending hunger and poverty would remain secondary to the Cold War and national security interests.

Talton argues that fractures of unity among Black American politicians and activists contributed to a decline in their influence in U.S. foreign affairs. Leland, with the Congressional Black Caucus and other activists, forged a unity in fighting white supremacy in Africa, which splintered as politicians and activists applied diverse interpretations to events and self-governing regimes in Africa. Talton concludes that political influence on African issues waned as the generation of Black internationalist leaders passed from Congress in the 1990s and the unity of action against white supremacy no longer held common cause.

Talton expertly structures his narrative into six main chapters, roughly paralleling stages in Leland's life and activism. After charting Leland's path to Congress and his work to bring the spirit of Black Internationalism to the U.S. Capitol in the first two chapters, Chapters Three and Four focus on Ethiopia and South Africa, respectively. Talton expands more thematically on humanitarian aid before returning to the focus on Ethiopia in the final chapter, which also relates the death of Leland while on a relief mission in Ethiopia.

Leland died in a plane crash en route to a refugee camp in August 1989, and in Talton's words "quickly faded into political obscurity." Today he is known more for the circumstances of his death than for his "unique political persona, humanitarian work, and a true reflection of black radical politics in

the U.S. government” (197). We all should thank Talton for his remarkable efforts to resurrect Leland’s life and work, and for the ways in which Talton connects that life to reveal broader currents in African and United States relations and history.

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