

# The History of America's "Africa Agenda". The Role of John Foster Dulles

By [Greg Guma](#)

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On February 11, 1958 Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was asked about Tunisia during a press conference.

A few days earlier French planes had bombed and strafed schools and a local market in the village of Saktiet. Dulles' reply was ignored by the daily press, and before the Internet that meant it almost didn't happen. But Toward Freedom obtained a transcript and printed it verbatim.

Editor Bill Lloyd said it seemed like "the most eloquent testimony in many months on the inadequacy of U.S. policy regarding North Africa." The headline read: ***"Dulles Humor slights Tunisia Policy"***

Dulles had been asked to "define a little more specifically for us" the US interest in the Tunisian crisis, basically, "what US objectives are in dealing with this situation?" TF continues online & in communities "We would like to see in Indonesia a government which is constitutional and which reflects the real interests and desire of the people of Indonesia," Dulles began. He went on to say that the Indonesian people would never want a Communist government, especially since "most of them are Moslems," and wouldn't want a government that "maintains itself only by coercive methods and does not respond to the will of the people."

Only then did someone in the press corps suggest that perhaps Dulles had misunderstood the question, since he was being asked about Tunisia "and you replied on the Indonesian. But could I ask the question again, sir?"

Dulles replied, "Maybe the same answer applies."

What followed was laughter. Eventually, Dulles did add that the US hoped to minimize the impact of any incident in Algeria. Nothing should deflect "the trend toward cooperation which we believe is in the interest on all concerned."

Lloyd proceeded to deconstruct the answer. By failing to push for peace, he explained, US policy was really encouraging "bitter-enders" and undermining any cooperation trend. He also took aim at Dulles' exaggeration of the communist threat, and said his so-called joke raised questions about his judgment and the information he received. Lloyd also pointed to the banning of unions and mentioned a controversial topic, the "French tactic of encouraging communist penetration to destroy nationalism." Then this:

"The communist label which was so playfully tossed on to Tunisia by Secretary Dulles also looks pretty foolish when one reflects that there are no communists whatever in the

Tunisian assembly but that slightly more than one-fourth of the Deputies in Paris are communists.

“The danger of communism in North Africa arises largely from the repressive French policy and our support of it with gifts of guns and money.”

Among the lessons for today is to stay alert for signs of the establishment’s favorite fallback strategy – distracting the public with a dehumanized enemy – and how the actions of other countries can create unexpected ripples. Father & son, 1957 President Bourguiba hoped the UN Security Council would take up the Algerian crisis. But many in his own political party were skeptical, and called British and US help in Tunisia’s negotiations with France an “Angle-Saxon smothering operation.”

Bill Lloyd admitted that Tunisia really had no one in her corner. After all, the French used US NATO planes to bomb Sakiet and the State Department opted to ignore it. But President Eisenhower had changed his tune since 1955. In March 1956, he had promised to do everything possible for a peaceful settlement in Algeria. The State Department pretended not to get the memo. The “smothering operation” apparently meant burying Bourguiba’s efforts to make the Algerian war part of any larger North Africa discussions, and blocking any push for separate Algerian nationhood. Lloyd reached a common sense conclusion. Only the US was in a position to speak firmly with France about the necessity of peace and independence for Algeria. Until then leaders would just be addressing fringe issues – or, in the case of Dulles on Tunisia – or Indonesia, make matters worse.

Global Visions By the end of the 1960s the non-aligned agenda, the movement Toward Freedom had pioneered in the US, was a plank in the foreign policy platform of many new nations. Making an editorial adjustment, the newsletter gradually shifted focus to the emerging impacts of neo-colonialism, acknowledging the complex economic challenges of independence, and promoting a role for non-aligned countries as peacemakers. Lloyd also took up a new fight – promoting satellite broadcasting as a tool for development and peace. Clearly ahead of his time, he offered a radical vision that still resonates almost half a century later. He wrote:

“World communication are as important to the future of world society as the nervous system is to the human body....A new structure commensurate with today’s technological advances is necessary, institutionalizing the concept of reciprocity, in which each nation will be given the opportunity to broadcast its music, drama, literature and views on world affairs to the rest of the world.”

Imagine: a true global exchange of cultures beyond the reach of commercial media, embracing interdependence and proudly promoting diversity. The 1970s began with groundbreaking reports on the proclamation of a “cooperative republic” in Guyana, emerging disaster in Cambodia, and Gulf Oil’s support for Portuguese colonialists in Africa. Where was the US media by this time? Still ignoring most struggles for freedom around the world. And when they did pay attention the coverage frequently reinforced stereotypes. TF continued to correct the record and fill in the gaps by drawing on a network of independent correspondents Lloyd had recruited. Maps were frequently used to reveal geopolitical dynamics (still a good note for media covering international news).

As editor, Bill Lloyd focused primarily on the UN’s role, non-alignment and Africa. He saw

hope in countries like Tunisia, and advanced new proposals for mediation and peacemaking. In 1973, for example, he called for “a nonviolent international volunteer corps” that could help reduce violence and perform essential tasks in threatened regions. That was a decade before the launch of Witness for Peace. At the end of the '70s Bill lobbied for world authority over the radio spectrum and the geostationary orbit for satellites. Covering a month-long International Telecommunications Union conference in Geneva, he peppered the leadership with questions and ideas. Here’s a taste of his thinking on the subject:

“Direct satellite broadcasting should be freed from the straightjacket of observing national boundaries at the receiving end and put on the basis of a world forum, with every national having its right to speak. The need for a world forum of nations is clear. US policy over the past 25 years has been seriously flawed by the pervasive ignorance on the part of the US public of the aspirations and demands of the majority of humankind living in the developing world.”

“As the late Adlai E. Stevenson said, ‘What America needs is a good hearing aid!’ All other countries need good hearing aids, too, in order to understand the real world of which they are only a part. Therefore, a forum by direct satellite broadcast, in which each nation had equal time to present its music, literature, and view on world affairs, would be a valuable supplement to existing news and cultural exchange channels.” \*

*On The Road Toward Freedom: A Cold War Story, part six of six. Greg Guma edited Toward Freedom from 1986-88, and 1994-2004.*

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