About-Face: The United States and Portuguese Colonialism in 1961

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Abstract

In 1961, the Kennedy Administration decided to adopt a new African policy, supporting self-determination and independence. This change occurred while the war against Portuguese colonial rule erupted in Angola. Acting in accordance with the principles adopted by the administration, the American Ambassador in Lisbon informed the Portuguese government of this new policy and recommended the urgent adoption of reforms in the Portuguese territories in Africa. When, in March, the situation in Angola was brought to debate in the United Nations, the United States voted in favor of a defeated resolution condemning Portuguese colonialism. Needless to say, this action provoked a serious crisis in Portuguese-American relations.

Keywords

United States, Portugal, Colonialism, Angola, United Nations

Introduction

Commenting on the election of John Fitzgerald Kennedy to the presidency of the United States, the Portuguese Ambassador in Washington, Luís Esteves Fernandes, predicted a difficult period for Portuguese-American relations. The new president, Fernandes warned, would promote "the official adoption of an anticolonial policy, subordinated to the principle of liberation for all dependent territories." (AHD, MNE-SE, PAA, Box 288). The Portuguese Ambassador was probably aware of Kennedy's considerable record in terms of public declarations on colonialism. Since the mid-1950s, John Kennedy had indeed realized the growing importance of nationalism in Africa and its consequences for American foreign policy. His presidential ambitions had led him to criticize the record of the Eisenhower administration and to promise that in a future Democratic administration the United States would "no longer abstain in the United Nations from voting on colonial issues [...] no longer trade our vote on other such issues for other supposed gains [...] no longer seek to prevent subjugated peoples from being heard." (quoted by Mahoney: 1983, 187).

Once elected, Kennedy would face a first serious test of his announced new African policy with the crisis in Angola in early 1961. In February, the first important armed action against Portuguese colonial rule in Angola took place, with the assaults on the civil and military prisons of Luanda; a few days later, the Liberian delegation at the United Nations requested the inclusion of the situation in Angola on the agenda for the next Security Council meeting. In Washington, it was time for important political decisions regarding Portugal and Portuguese colonialism.

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