During its first two years in office, President John F. Kennedy’s administration had to direct more sustained crisis management attention to Indonesia than to Vietnam. Alongside the mounting Indochina conflict, policymakers also had to face the threat of a war for control of the western half of the island of New Guinea (also known as Papua and West Irian).\(^1\) Kennedy’s foreign policy toward Southeast Asia has been hotly disputed, but even the harshest assessments hail his government’s mediation of the West New Guinea dispute as a success.\(^2\) The Netherlands had retained West New Guinea as a colony when it recognized Indonesian independence in 1949; Indonesia demanded the territory be “returned to the fold of the motherland” and threatened an irredentist war. By pressuring both sides into an American-authored agreement, the Kennedy administration felt it had managed to avoid a Dutch-Indonesian clash that would have benefited only the Soviet Union, and also hoped to maintain stability in Southeast Asia at a time when it was increasing American commitments in the region.

American involvement in the dispute ignored the local population entirely. Yet West New Guinea remains in dispute between the Indonesian government and a nationalist movement among the indigenous Papuan population, a conflict rooted in the aborted decolonization process. Apart from the removal of Dutch colonial rule, the dispute today remains similar to that in the years 1960-62: should the territory be a province of Indonesia, or an independent country? Kennedy’s intervention arguably prevented an immediate explosion, but it did so at the cost of forty years of instability. If it prevented an immediate war, it permitted a simmering low-intensity war that cost thousands of lives. Here, as in so
many of Kennedy’s initiatives, the New Frontiersmen concentrated on short-term crisis management. Their failure to consider local aspirations – a failure rooted in inability to see the “primitive” dark-skinned Papuans as legitimate international actors – created the conditions for an ongoing insurgency. Histories of the dispute have only been able to see it as a Kennedy success because they, too, have ignored the Papuans themselves. There are recent exceptions that try to include Papuans as diplomatic actors in their own history, but the story remains largely one of American success because it largely treats the people most affected as passive objects, not subjects of their own history – just as the Kennedy administration did at the time.

The main actors in the dispute’s settlement each plotted the dispute on their own mental maps, their ways of viewing the world spatially and ideologically. Those images drew on racialized and gendered perceptions held in the minds of policymakers. For American decision makers, West New Guinea was insignificant on Cold War mental maps that stressed a defensive line of islands containing “Red China,” with Indonesia anchoring a “Malay barrier” that served as a second line of defence in the rear of mainland Southeast Asia. Indonesian leaders saw it as a lost province severed from the national “geo-body.” For the Netherlands, the ability to exert influence in the Pacific showed they remained a world power rather than a small European state; the failure of their colonial dreams forced the Dutch to concede their country’s diminished status. Papuan nationalists began to plot their claims to independence on a mental map derived from colonial anthropology that contrasted a foreign “Indonesia” and a racially defined “Melanesia.”

Although Kennedy and his officials professed a strong dislike for President Sukarno’s “guided democracy,” they also had much in common with it. Both Kennedy and Sukarno led “regimes in motion” that stressed gendered themes of dynamism, vigorous action, and national greatness as they danced from crisis to crisis. Where Sukarno painted a heroic portrait of an unstoppable torrent of Asian and African nationalism, Kennedy wove an image of a United States in sympathy with the new forces of
nationalism. Profoundly influenced by the paradigm of modernization, the Kennedy administration mapped different “stages of development” onto different regions much as the League of Nations had done in an earlier period with A mandates for relatively advanced colonies, B mandates for intermediate cases, and C mandates for South Seas islands that might take hundreds of years to be “ready” for independence. When Indonesians described Papuan jungles as a new frontier for their country, those words fell on sympathetic ears in Washington. Indonesia had to be modernized in order to prevent it from “going communist.” Remote, undeveloped West New Guinea was the price paid to entice Jakarta back to “constructive” paths of development. In a little-known crisis on a colonial frontier peripheral to United States national interests, the Kennedy administration displayed its improvisational and activist bent. It also demonstrated the importance of perceptions underlying day-to-day decision-making.

Guided in part by mental maps that drew on long-established ideas that linked race and primitiveness, policymakers drew on the new prescriptions of modernization theory and ideas of masculine vigor and dynamism. Spatial and temporal imaginings of Papua as remote and primitive reinforced thinking grounded in the Cold War to shape administration attitudes and decisions.

Indonesian leaders forged their nation during a four-year revolution against Dutch colonial rule beginning with President Sukarno’s 1945 declaration of independence. Its leaders skillfully combined perjuangan (struggle), the mass mobilization of the people to resist Dutch military force, with diplomasi (diplomacy) aimed at winning international support. By 1949, despite the importance of the Netherlands to the North Atlantic alliance then being formed, the United States accepted the need to back moderate Asian nationalists and pressured the Dutch into accepting an independent Indonesia. When the Netherlands agreed to recognize Indonesian independence, however, it held on to West New Guinea, its remotest corner of empire. Indonesia disputed this, and the conflict spoiled hopes for a cooperative
Indonesian-Dutch relationship. This was not because West New Guinea was desirable territory: its importance to both countries lay in the imagination. Some in the Netherlands saw it as a tropical jewel saved by Dutch Empire Loyalists, a fetish-object replacing the lost Indies. It offered a chance to demonstrate the superior virtues of Dutch colonial mission, to build a colony “which would stand out like a lighthouse above the decayed area around it.” Indonesian nationalists, on the other hand, remembered West New Guinea as the site of a notorious prison camp for political dissidents. In Sukarno’s words, it was “the martyr place of the struggle for independence.” Much concerned with defining their national space and Indonesia’s legitimacy as successor to the Dutch East Indies, nationalists saw the continued Dutch presence in one corner of the Indies as tantamount to hacking an arm off the new state.

Yet West New Guinea was neither model state nor martyr place, but a land with its own people. Coastal elites were becoming aware of their place in a wider world with the 1944 arrival of American troops under General Douglas MacArthur. In a time of millenarian movements and rapid change, Papuans witnessed African-American soldiers being treated with apparent equality. “They worked and fought shoulder to shoulder with their white comrades,” one prominent Papuan leader recalled. “The Negro men flew fighter planes, commanded warships, fired artillery, and drove vehicles and so forth….

Seeing this, Papuans asked themselves why can the Negroes do these things and the Papuans not? Is not our skin color and hair the same?”11 Local elites coalesced into two streams in the town around MacArthur’s headquarters, dubbed Kampong Harapan, (village of hope). One group, led by anti-Japanese war hero Silas Papare, wanted immediate freedom as an autonomous province of Indonesia. The other sought eventual independence under Dutch tutelage. Each in its own way was an attempt to advance Papuan nationalism as part of a larger unit.12

In 1954, the Indonesian government took its claim to the United Nations. It managed two-thirds of the votes in committee, but fell short of victory in the General Assembly when twelve abstainers
(nine Latin American states plus Canada, Israel and Taiwan) shifted to vote with the Netherlands. Indonesians blamed the United States for masterminding the vote shifts. Never again would Jakarta come so close to winning its case in the General Assembly. After another UN defeat in 1957, Sukarno announced a new phase of economic confrontation, nationalizing the Dutch corporations that dominated the Indonesian economy, and expelling 47,000 Dutch nationals. This pushed pro-Western dissidents into open rebellion and Indonesia into economic and political chaos that lasted until the 1959 imposition of what Sukarno called guided democracy. As president, Sukarno became the guide, balancing the army and Indonesian Communist party (PKI), the two remaining strong national forces. To restore unity, Sukarno called on his countrymen to return to “the rails of the revolution,” to the 1945-49 period when people were united against colonial rule, including a new confrontation with the Netherlands. To every American diplomat and politician who came through his door, Sukarno offered a deal: support Indonesia’s claim, and win Indonesian friendship. But the Eisenhower administration, more concerned with European strategy and thus with a friendly Netherlands, declared its neutrality. In practice, U.S. neutrality favored the Dutch refusal to negotiate.

Southeast Asia took centre stage as John F. Kennedy assumed the presidency in January 1961. The new administration was immediately confronted with a crisis in Laos. Sukarno was determined to force his own issue of choice on the new administration too. American involvement had helped force the Netherlands into accepting the Republic of Indonesia in 1949, after an early phase of pro-Dutch neutrality. Sukarno hoped to maneuver Washington into a repeat performance.

Postrevisionist scholarship on Kennedy has downplayed the case for sharp departures from Eisenhower’s foreign policy, whether hagiographic tales by New Frontier participants and cheerleaders, or damning accounts by revisionists, in favor of interpretations that stress continuities and the
improvisational nature of the Kennedy foreign policy. Foreign policy emerged through the administration’s handling of such issues as West New Guinea, drawing on both existing American policy as practiced by Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and on critiques delivered by Kennedy as an opposition senator. The Kennedy style featured greater attention to and sympathy with third world nationalism, a consistent trend toward activism, an intensified reliance on modernization theory, and a continued adherence to the same Cold War mental maps used by policy makers since the 1940s. In the words of Roger Hilsman, a key player in the new administration and especially in its Southeast Asia policy, the administration was “activist in foreign policy, oriented to the emerging peoples and the new nationalisms, and determined to shape events.” Where the genial but lethargic Eisenhower had allowed world problems to fester, the new brooms would sweep all that away, emphasizing motion, crisis management, and youth – a concept, as Thomas Brown has written, “rich with connotative associations: activism, optimism, vigor (‘vig-ah’), and the pursuit of excellence.”

These themes of dynamism drew on the Kennedy mystique: the sportsman, the young PT boat commander and heroic rescuer (an image now commemorated in a “G. I. JFK” doll for sale through the Kennedy Library). He led and exemplified a band of “action intellectuals” set to roll up their sleeves and tackle the problems of a nation gone soft during its years of “drift and impotence,” who were both young and idealistic, and “hard” and realistic. Kennedy had assailed Richard Nixon for saying in his famous kitchen debate with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev that the United States might trail in missiles, but led in color televisions. “I would rather,” he said, “have my television black and white, and the largest rockets in the world.” Given this gendered mindset that demanded energy over lethargy, action over reflection, dynamic motion over caution, policymakers made activism into a fetish. No crisis in the world could be ignored. As a corollary, any government seeking American attention had only to create a crisis in order to gain Washington’s intervention.
Kennedy’s policy stressed economic growth in developing countries in order to build stable, non-communist regimes that would then be able to aid their neighbors, becoming what analyst Russell Fifield called “islands of development.” Ideologically, the New Frontiersmen no longer viewed the third world through Dulles’ Manichean lenses, with neutrality in a good-versus-evil Cold War pegged as immoral. Instead, the ideological underpinnings completed a shift already begun in the late Eisenhower years, to modernization theory. Kennedy’s brand of American nationalism was rooted in an imperial mission to spread modernity to the world. All societies, modernization theory suggested, went through set stages of growth. Since they were vulnerable to communist subversion at certain points in their growth process, the United States should accelerate their development and thus allow them to pass the vulnerable stage as swiftly as possible. The theory made neutralism acceptable for young states. Kennedy justified it by recalling that the United States had itself been a neutral state when “in a comparable stage of development.” The Bible of modernization theorists was Walt Rostow’s *Stages of Economic Growth: A non-communist manifesto*, but Rostow was just the most academic of the modernization theorists who influenced the administration.

This perspective transformed neutral governments like Sukarno’s from rivals into potential partners in containment. For containment – the potent mental map of an outward-thrusting red menace that had to be confronted at all points by American power – remained basic. In Asia, policymakers mapped it along a “great crescent” that ran from Japan along the “offshore island chain” to the Philippines, then bent west toward the Indian subcontinent. Although not on the front lines like Vietnam and Laos, Indonesia formed a second line of defence, “rich in resources but weak in self-defence capabilities” and thus highly vulnerable to communism. The “loss” of a state in this tier would spell disaster for the “free world” position on the mainland. As the Kennedy administration stepped up involvement in Southeast Asia, this mental map grew more powerful still. The new administration attempted a concerted regional strategy, containing communism at all points. On the one hand, the
United States had to look resolute and credible on the mainland, and could not lightly back away from commitments made in the past. On the other, the administration sought accommodation with neutralist governments like Sukarno’s in the hopes that they could be enticed into an informal “new Pacific community” of non-communist states. As John Subritzky has written on this strategy, the “key to its success was Indonesia. By focusing so exclusively on the Vietnam war, historians have generally neglected the crucial importance of this vast and populous country to overall American strategy in the region.”

Attorney-General Robert Kennedy noted that the “capture of Indonesia by the Communists would enable them to flank the whole of Southeast Asia, an area barely holding on to freedom by its fingertips.” Thus the administration gave the nod to a dual policy advocated by Howard Jones, the U.S. ambassador in Jakarta. On the one hand, Washington would seek personal friendship with Sukarno and send American economic advisers. On the other hand, it would rebuild its assets in the military.

Indonesian army chief A.H. Nasution’s hopes for effective grassroots competition with the PKI dovetailed perfectly with the Kennedy’s administration’s civic action strategy. Modernization theorists were placing increasing hope in the military as a relatively incorruptible agent of third world modernization, and Indonesia was no exception. Up to one in five Indonesian army officers in this period were U.S.-trained. Jones advocated redirecting military aid to strengthen the anti-communist army leadership and prevent the USSR from being the sole supplier of prestige items. Meanwhile, Kennedy ordered a comprehensive report on the best forms of aid to ensure a more reliable Indonesia in the future. Economist Don Humphrey, the report’s author, called for a wide range of support, especially the training of more Indonesian students to become “the core of a new elite” dedicated to modernization. “Our aid programs were not designed to shore up Sukarno; they were designed to educate the oncoming generation of Indonesians,” Jones stressed. According to Rostow, Kennedy “was outraged at Sukarno’s frivolous waste of Indonesia’s potential for development” and tried to change
that, but also “wanted to keep a line of communication going with the military and the others who might be useful after Sukarno left the scene.”

This “two-track post-West Irian strategy” required resolution of the West New Guinea dispute so the economic-military strategy could go ahead.

In 1960, the Dutch government announced a West New Guinea self-government plan, transforming the debate from Dutch colonialism versus Indonesian anti-colonialism, into one over what sort of decolonization should take place. Dutch policy tacked with the global decolonizing “wind of change” to stress eventual independence. Where earlier colonial authorities had stressed the uniqueness of each Papuan language group, they now sought to build a dynamic educated elite. Papuan nationalists reacted by demanding faster progress. They formed a baker’s dozen of parties, the most prominent being the National party (Parna), which called for independence by 1970 and tripartite talks between the Netherlands, Indonesia and Papuan leaders. The New Guinea Council inaugurated in February 1961 (with twenty-two of its twenty-eight members Papuan) became an embryonic parliament for the nation being born in the minds of Papuan elites, and a “partner” for Dutch decolonization planning. At the same time, there was a curious hesitancy in the Dutch refusal to set target dates for independence and in the continuing belief that Papuans were not, when it came down to it, ready for self-government.

Governor Rudy Plateel, a leading voice for Papuan self-determination, described the council more cynically in private: “There is a large round table with a pile of money on it. Around it are seated a number of black men. Behind each is a white who tells him how much money to ask for.” Beneath the rhetoric of emancipation, racial attitudes lingered.

Prewar colonial race scholarship rendered Papuans as residents of Melanesia, in contrast to Indonesia (another anthropological term used initially to describe not only the Dutch East Indies but also Malaya, the Philippines and Madagascar). Where the Indonesians were for the most part brown-skinned and straight-haired, Papuans had black skin and curly hair, prompting their depiction as “Oriental Negroes” by turn-of-the-century Dutch explorers. By making racial differences the
justification for their separation of West New Guinea from Indonesia, the Dutch defined a boundary upon which a new Papuan identity could emerge. “Race” proved effective as a mobilizer in part because coastal Papuans first experienced colonialism at the hands of Indonesian employees of the colonial state rather than Dutchmen, who were thin on the ground before 1945. Often condescending Indonesian attitudes toward the “ignorant Papuans” (Papua bodoh) recalled the days when Indonesian sultanates raided the coasts to enslave the native “apes without tails.” Indonesian political depictions of West New Guinea tended toward racial caricature. One activist wrote about the need to “free” Papuans from their “stone age civilization” while noting their skills in music and sports; foreign minister Subandrio spoke of the need to get Papuans “down out of the trees even if we have to pull them down”; and Sukarno’s audience appeared in blackface at one rally.

Racial categories in the Papuan-Indonesian conflict were very recent constructions. Derived from colonial anthropology, they took a situation of ethnic fluidity and began to freeze it in place as a political mobilizer. Papuan leaders tried to take this new marker of difference and use it to bring a nation into being. In adopting “race” as a marker of difference, Papuan nationalists embraced a new mental map of sharp division, rather than gradual shading, between Indonesia and Melanesia (islands of dark-skinned people). Many equated the racial divide with an ideological divide. “I don’t believe that in the future we will be friendly with Asiatic people,” said Nicolaas Jouwe, vice-president of the New Guinea Council. “They will become more and more communistic. We are a Pacific people.” Racial perceptions were important, too, in shaping U.S. attitudes. Especially in this period of struggle over civil rights, in which racism at home interfered with U.S. ability to project an overseas image as a defender of human freedoms, domestic and international racial politics intertwined. U.S. policymakers, for instance, stressed desegregation in part because poor treatment of African-Americans and even African diplomats was a major diplomatic liability for U.S. foreign policy.
Moves toward Papuan self-determination threatened Indonesia’s occupation of the moral high ground. On 17 August 1960, Sukarno inaugurated a new phase of confrontation by breaking all diplomatic relations with the Netherlands and launching an arms buildup. This boosted unity among the main political forces in Indonesia: the PKI was able to tie itself more closely to the president on an anti-imperialist issue, while the army saw increased funding and influence. In an echo of the revolution, the campaign for West Irian combined diplomacy and struggle. The main source of arms was the Soviet Union, only too pleased to support third world nationalists against Western powers. “Exhaust the Soviet arsenal,” Sukarno reportedly told his ambassador to Moscow, Adam Malik. By 1962, Indonesia was the largest non-communist recipient of Soviet bloc military aid, with credits in excess of $1.5-billion, and military spending accounted for half the Indonesian budget. Military efficacy, however, was secondary to the appearance of armed might. Indonesia was pursuing what foreign minister Subandrio dubbed “revolutionary diplomacy.” Here was another regime in motion, which like Kennedy’s stressed dynamism, activism, and an assertive foreign policy. These concepts had been present from the beginnings of the nationalist movement, a project of freeing the feminine body of the motherland (Ibu Pertiwi) from colonialism through dynamic action by nationalist men. In Sukarno’s words, the nationalist mission was to:

Breathe life into the spirits of your hearts, increase all the original skills there are in your body, intensify all the courage of the banteng [buffalo] hidden in your soul; pour out that spirit, those organizing skills and that banteng courage into the body of the party. Pour out that masculinity into the body of the masses in such a way that it will retrieve its own forgotten masculinity as well as the new masculinity of modern mass-action. Gendered themes became stronger as the nationalist movement won its freedom in war of revolution that spawned heroic memories, and then inherited a state apparatus. Its central ideologue was Sukarno himself, the master orator and wielder of symbols; its central message was the unity and strength of the Indonesian people, forged in the flames of continuing revolution; its central struggle was to “regain” West Irian as part of the global struggle against imperialism. Dutch colonial rhetoric often feminized
Indonesian men, and U.S. colonial-period images did the same. That legacy remained in post-independence U.S. images of Sukarno as a vain ruler dressing in tailored uniforms of his own design, guided by emotional nationalism rather than rational logic. Where American images of Sukarno were often of a strutting peacock, he inverted the image for his own people. His image only benefited when he was criticized for womanizing on his foreign trips, and he was careful to bolster his masculine image through the conjuring of national grandeur and the construction of grand projects and symbols like the National Monument in Jakarta, a column locals dubbed “Sukarno’s last erection.”

Domestically, Sukarno’s government made little effort to challenge any social force, seeking instead to unite and synthesize them all. It displaced revolutionary themes to the international arena, where it claimed a right to lead the “new emerging forces” against the “old established forces.” The original concept of nonalignment as pioneered by leaders like Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru stressed conciliation and independence of action. Sukarno’s new emerging forces concept preached “an era of confrontation for the entire world.” In this vision, the image of the world divided into three parts – West, Soviet bloc and third world – was to give way to a two-fold division into new and old.

The glue for this new future-oriented nationalism came from recalling a glorious past, then equating it on maps with the extent of Indonesia’s territory. As Sukarno and other ideologues piled revolutionary concept upon revolutionary concept, they also projected the nation backwards in time. Drawing on an epic fourteenth-century poem, politician-historian Mohammad Yamin portrayed the ancient Javanese empire of Majapahit as “the last sovereign Indonesia-wide state.” Majapahit’s actual extent was far less, but this layering of Majapahit memory on the map of modern Indonesia defined the two as identical. This mental map of archipelagic unity rendered the territory infinitely more important than the people who lived in it. Thus Subandrio at the UN rejected “the Netherlands’ concept of self-determination” as an “amputation which the Dutch are performing on our national body.” Papuans,
peripheral geographically, came to be seen as embodiments of an earlier, primitive state – Indonesians now, and therefore Indonesians throughout all history – albeit backward ones.

Indonesian leaders plotted expansion into West New Guinea as recovery rather than conquest. Still, the idea that peripheral areas were in an earlier stage of development meshed easily with an American history of expansion along a backward frontier and the new modernization theory. It also drew on notions of some countries as young children in the family of nations, prevalent in a time of many newly independent states. Existing American perceptions of Asians tended to see them as children, whether as mischievous troublemakers or promising wards like President Taft’s Filipino “little brown brothers.”40 Earlier travelers were able to write of Indonesians that their dinner “when set out with tiny plates and bowls of condiments and flavourings looks like a doll’s dinner party.”41 Postwar media images of Indonesia mixed progress with the picturesque. Images of youth pervaded, with the implication that Indonesia would do well to follow in the American model. One typical article in National Geographic called Indonesia a “nation in knee pants” that “wants so desperately to learn.” On the other hand, Sukarno had lost his earlier image as “the George Washington of Indonesia” and was painted increasingly as a spoiled child.42 If Indonesia emerged somewhere between promising youngster and problem child, Papua was a mere “infant” still unable to “stand on its own legs” as a Dutch government publication argued, or at best a land “compelled to skip [its] political youth.”43 Both Washington and Jakarta saw the Papuans as mired in the stone age. Both were regimes in continual frenetic action, employing progressive rhetorics of emancipation to underpin their foreign policy ideologies. Even as American policymakers saw Sukarno as emotional and overly leftist, there were important similarities of style and overlapping notions of progress between the two governments.
To the incoming administration, Indonesia mattered. Kennedy told his cabinet it was “the most significant nation in Southeast Asia” and a solution to the West New Guinea dispute “the key” to winning Indonesia. The State Department’s policy planning staff came up with a plan to remove the issue from the list of international crises by placing it under a trusteeship, preferably run by pro-Western Malaya, and encouraged an abortive mediation bid by Malayan prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman that would have seen West New Guinea administered jointly by Malaya, India and perhaps Ceylon.

The White House national security staff conducted a more open review, consulting academic advisors and unofficial Dutch voices. Kennedy’s inner circle of young intellectuals saw Dutch concern with prestige as slightly ridiculous posturing by a small nation driven more by emotion than good sense. Here were the “feminine” weaknesses they despised: hesitation, emotionalism, unwillingness to change, and lack of self-reliance. Rostow remembered Kennedy explaining to Dutch foreign minister Joseph Luns “quietly, carefully, that he had a couple of wars in Southeast Asia; and West New Guinea was one he would like not to have to fight. . . . Laos and Vietnam were enough.” The Dutchmen received with respect in Kennedy’s Washington were those seen as hard-headed, pragmatic and adaptable: business leaders willing to speak to Sukarno through back channels; Prince Bernhard, consort to the Dutch Queen, who asked administration officials to talk sense into his country’s cabinet; and NATO Secretary General Dirk Stikker, an ex-foreign minister who thought most Dutchmen “would be extremely grateful if US will take leadership in pushing through an international trusteeship arrangement.”

The national security staff rejected the State Department trusteeship plan as fuzzy thinking. “We must bite the bullet,” argued Robert Komer, “for this issue is heading toward a crisis.” A pro-communist Indonesia would be “an infinitely greater threat . . . than Indo possession of a few thousand square miles of cannibal land.” By the end of their review, the national security staff was ready to recommend a positive mediation effort. Robert Johnson, point man on the issue, listed American objectives as first, eliminating an issue that was driving Indonesia toward communism, and second, “the
achievement of a major gain in U.S. relations with Indonesia.” Eisenhower’s greatest failure on West New Guinea, the New Frontiersmen believed, had been inaction. Their solution, to this as to so many conflicts, was dynamic action.

When in April 1961 Sukarno became the first foreign head of state to visit President Kennedy, the administration took two “tough” steps on West New Guinea. For some years the Dutch had been comforted by what they saw as a promise from Dulles to come to their aid if Indonesia attacked. Secretary of State Dean Rusk informed Luns that the United States no longer considered itself bound by this commitment. Kennedy delivered a second slap by overturning a State Department decision to send an observer to the official inauguration of the New Guinea Council, centrepiece of the Dutch self-determination plan. The Indonesians had come to Washington with great hopes. “Give me something to enable me to say that America is our friend,” Sukarno pleaded. Subandrio advanced a new proposal in light of the trusteeship talk, offering for the first time to consider a trusteeship of one or two years as a transitional step to Indonesian rule instead of the long-standing Indonesian demand for direct transfer of administration. This foreshadowed the eventual compromise. Kennedy told Sukarno he wished to be helpful, but made no commitments. The administration was replacing passive neutrality with an active policy, but still sought neutrality.

With the election of the New Guinea Council, Papuan nationalists became diplomatic actors. The council was supposed to devote itself to advice on domestic policy and preparing for self-determination, but it swiftly staked a claim as the legitimate international voice of the Papuan people. Dutch efforts, however, had shifted from trying to satisfy Papuan aspirations to a bid to gain U.S. support. Throughout the 1950s the Dutch had opposed international involvement. Now, seeing themselves as the weaker party, they offered a bold plan for internationalization. Luns presented a draft
UN resolution in September 1961 promising to transfer sovereignty to the Papuans and administration to the United Nations. The Netherlands would continue financing the entire territorial budget, to the tune of about $30-million a year. Although Luns’ plan united Dutch domestic opinion and responded to State Department wishes, it bypassed and angered both the Indonesian government and the New Guinea Council. Subandrio called it “a declaration of war.” He appealed to other African and Asian states, saying Indonesia had fought for their freedom and they must now return the favor. His sole concession was to accept an Indian resolution for bilateral talks.52

The New Guinea Council, meanwhile, resolved that the Hague was “no longer free” to dispose of the territory without council consent.53 Its ethnic Papuan members convened a National Congress that took the next step in nation-formation by agreeing on a new name for the country, West Papua, a flag, and an anthem. This was effectively the first Papuan claim to independent statehood: the manifesto asserted “we the Papuan people demand to obtain our place among the other free peoples and nations.” The trial of strength with Indonesia required diplomatic appeals to outside powers. These in turn helped to shape the emergent Papuan identity. Beginning with the independence of Ghana in 1957, a wave of decolonization swept the continent, replicating what had happened in Southeast Asia a decade-and-a-half earlier. Sixteen African countries joined the United Nations in 1960, shifting the balance of voting power and making African support a valuable asset. The new international configuration made it important to redefine identity perceptions in order to seek new alliances. Papuan nationalists sought to deploy perceptions of race, created elsewhere, as a diplomatic asset. In the process, they were shifting the basic definition of Papuan identity, a fluid and evolving concept, to graft on ideas of race formed in a different context.

Thus the nationalist mental map based on Melanesian racial identity expanded to include Africa. In the fall of 1961, nationalists began to assert a common identity between Papuans and Africans, through songs with titles like “Dutch New Guinea is New Africa,” and pamphlets like *Voice of the*
Negroids of the Pacific to Negroids throughout the World. The campaign combined a pragmatic effort to win international support with the new Papuan identity rooted in perceptions of racial difference from Indonesia and consequent racial similarity with dark-skinned Africans. “Many, many times you have heard about us from the Dutch and Indonesians, without having known us. Now we will take the floor ourselves,” New Guinea councillor Jouwe wrote. “We are living in the Pacific, our people are called Papuans, our ethnic origin is the Negroid Race. . . . We do not want to be slaves any more.”

Council vice-president Markus Kaisiepo led a Papuan delegation to lobby African governments. The pan-African appeal even reached into the United States, with appeal to organizations like the NAACP. Papuan nationalists had been able to draw for some time upon the support of right-leaning organizations abroad. The “new Africa” mental map allowed them to add organizations sympathetic to pan-African ideas. This support network continues to linger, seen for instance in recent lobbying for Papuan human rights by the U.S. Congressional black caucus.

Papuan deployment of racial concepts showed a nationalist effort to define their own identity, partly for pragmatic diplomatic reasons and partly to create an identity powerful enough to unite the Papuan population. Yet the nationalist movement was not strong enough to overcome racial tropes and international political alignments. The effort to identify with Africa trapped the Papuan leadership between two African camps divided by their attitudes toward the Congo civil war. Indonesia backed Patrice Lumumba’s central government, and in doing so won the support of African governments that sided with Lumumba. Indonesian officials argued with some success that the Dutch were trying to split Indonesia through a separate Papuan state, in the same way many African leaders thought Belgium was trying to split the Congo by backing separatists. Papuan nationalists felt constrained by the Congo parallel. “Another Congo cannot happen here,” one Papuan leader said in acknowledging the comparison. “The Congolese kicked out European officials. We will not do that.”

That effort to disarm Western fears of another Congo also alienated some of the African governments whose support
Papuan nationalists hoped to win. Their diplomacy appealed to Western governments, and to conservative African regimes, but tended to alienate more radical governments. The context of global decolonization debates meant outside powers often viewed Papua through the lens of the Congo. To many in the West, the Congo conflict was a classic “tribal war” and thus the clinching argument against “premature” independence for similar colonies. Policymakers already disposed to view such cases as Papua through racial preconceptions did so all the more as Papuan diplomats stressed their identification with Africa.

All this formed the background to the U.S. decision on where to stand on the Dutch UN proposal for Papuan self-government. The American delegation felt trapped: by supporting the Dutch resolution it would alienate Indonesia, but if it opposed or abstained after months of detailed discussions with Dutch officials, it would alienate the Netherlands. Rusk’s State Department rather than the White House national security staff was setting the agenda, and decided to proceed with an American compromise resolution despite Indonesian opposition. At this point, Kennedy was unwilling to overrule his secretary of state. The Brazzaville group of conservative African governments offered a resolution endorsing Papuan self-determination that married Indian and Dutch resolutions by calling for bilateral talks, but also authorized implementation of the Luns plan if talks did not reach a speedy agreement. The Brazzaville resolution was the product of the diplomacy and desires of its African sponsors, who saw their own experience mirrored among Papuan nationalists. Since it won U.S. backing, contemporary writing and historical accounts tend to paint it as a front for US goals, when it was more accurately a lifeline seized by a constrained American UN delegation. In voting that followed bloc lines, the Brazzaville resolution fell short of the two-thirds needed for adoption. Western governments, Latin America and the Brazzaville group voted in favor (with four abstentions) but only three misfit states in the Middle East and Asia joined them: Israel, the Philippines and Taiwan. Indonesia won the support of Asia, the Soviet bloc and the African radicals (with, again, four
abstainers). Sukarno’s government saw the chances for American support melting away. The imperatives of both struggle and diplomacy now pointed to the need to rattle sabres.

December 1961 marked a turning point. By stopping just short of a declaration of war, Sukarno won the American mediation he had been seeking for years. In Washington, the national security staff’s pro-Indonesia approach won out over State Department caution. Indonesian diplomats were bitter and Sukarno furious about the U.S. role in UN debates, which for the first time had seen Washington vote against Indonesia. The White House staff minced no words in pressing for swift action to reverse that. Robert Johnson noted that “the net result of our many months of activity was not to produce the solution acceptable to both sides, which we had sought, but to vote against the Indonesians twice. . . . There is only one solution of the West New Guinea issue that will be permanent and that will remove it from Indonesian politics, and that is Indonesian control.” Some American business interests also pressed for a solution. Along with Shell, U.S.-owned Caltex (a joint enterprise by oil majors Socal and Texaco) and Stanvac (controlled by Esso and Mobil) dominated the Indonesian oil industry. On a flight leaving Jakarta, John D. Rockefeller III of Esso wrote to Rusk analyzing the Indonesian situation as a standoff between the pro-American army and the communist party. Since tensions over West New Guinea helped the PKI, he urged that “our government lay the situation on the line with the Dutch almost to the point of an ultimatum.” Among other American companies, both Freeport Sulfur and U.S. Steel had mining concessions in West New Guinea, which were delayed by the political uncertainty over who would govern the territory. These companies added to the pressure for an early settlement.

Late in 1961, Sukarno began hinting in public speeches that he would soon order an invasion. On 1 December, the new Papuan flag flew for the first time alongside Dutch banners. Jakarta could expect anti-colonial sympathy for a conflict with the Dutch, but much less in a war against Papuans
fighting under their own flag. Sukarno announced he would issue a major command on 19 December, the anniversary of a Dutch military offensive during the Indonesian revolution, in the revolutionary capital, Yogyakarta. Days before speaking, he intimated to Ambassador Jones that he would order an attack. Jones responded by arranging a letter from President Kennedy that implicitly offered American mediation if Indonesia refrained from invading. Sukarno’s reply tossed the problem back into Kennedy’s lap:

I hope that your efforts will make the Netherlands’ transfer of administration to Indonesia take place in a smooth way, so that a conflict will become unnecessary. On the other hand I hope to have your understanding that as long as the Netherlands continue with their preparations for the proclamation of Independent Papua (the so-called Papua flag and national anthem have already been introduced into West Irian) there is no alternative left to us but the use of force in order to face this illegal, forceful occupation of West Irian by the Netherlands.

Sukarno was willing to fight or, if transfer was agreed, to talk; the choice was up to the United States. Jones believed that Kennedy’s missive “saved the day” by persuading Sukarno not to order an invasion. Still, tensions escalated. In January 1962, Indonesian and Dutch ships clashed. One Indonesian ship went down: a bloody nose for Jakarta but a boost to war fever. The army was not ready for a full invasion, but was infiltrating soldiers into the jungles of New Guinea. By the middle of 1962, General Nasution reported two thousand troops infiltrated and three-quarters of the Indonesian armed forces mobilized for an attack. U.S. defence analysts believed Indonesia would be able to invade successfully by the end of 1962.

Sukarno’s campaign to thwart a Papuan state also sparked the defection of a group of Papuan exiles who had backed his struggle against Dutch colonialism throughout the 1950s. Papuan nationalist leader Silas Papare and his supporters had moved to Jakarta in 1949, working closely with Indonesian authorities until their declaration of an autonomous West Irian provincial government-in-exile failed to win Indonesian government support. The Indonesian government dismissed Papare from his position as an ex-officio member of the Indonesian parliament in 1960. After the election of the New Guinea Council and the inauguration of new nationalist symbols, Papare told Jones that he faced arrest for
being too critical of Sukarno. Papuan nationalists, he said, were “awaiting his return before announcing independence.” He said he wanted to return to be part of a new Papuan state, and asked for American aid. None came, but the appeal was a sign that the two streams of Papuan nationalism, which had diverged in 1945-49, were reconverging. Those nationalists proved too weak, however, to assert themselves as an international force independent of their respective patrons.

Papuan politics made no impact in Washington, where West New Guinea appeared as a land too hopelessly primitive to dream of self-determination. “For those Americans who could find it on a map,” Bradley Simpson points out, “West New Guinea was a blank slate upon which they could write their fantasies about primitive people and the benefits of encounter with the West.” Most U.S. portrayals of the West New Guinea combined depictions of a hostile terrain with fascination over the cannibals and headhunters who accounted for a small proportion of the Papuan population, but a majority of U.S. media coverage. These portrayals were rooted in prewar travelers’ tales and anthropologist accounts, reinforced by reports from American evangelical missionaries in the New Guinea interior. The Dutch government and mission societies had developed an entire language of protection and stewardship of the “backward” Papuans around these stone age perceptions, in which anthropologists became colonial governors and Dutch administrators were nicknamed “father of the Papuans” and the like.

Stone age images began to reach a wider American audience beginning with the 1961 Harvard-Peabody anthropological expedition to the Dani people of the interior mountains, and the many photographs of scantily clad Dani men and topless Dani women transmitted home. The expedition, dispatched “partly in the spirit of conservators of a passing age,” studied the Dani in order to study the past of all human societies. From it came a series of books and films, often previewed in photographic spreads in U.S. magazines. In early 1962, Michael Rockefeller, a promising young anthropologist whose family name always conjured attention, died on an expedition among the Asmat people of the southern coast. The young man, adrift in a raft, was lost while trying to swim for land in crocodile-infested waters.
The search for his body, never found, featured the personal participation of his father, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. This made headlines, and underlined the image of West New Guinea as hopelessly exotic, hostile, and primitive. *Life* Magazine’s report, for instance, portrayed an “anguished search for signs of a missing son” in a morass of impassable remoteness:

> Below us the Arafura Sea blended into a treacherous swamp, covered over with green scum and rotting logs and laced with muddy estuaries where big crocodiles prowled. Beyond lay spongy tangles of sage palms and mangroves, alive with snakes, scorpions, centipedes and malarial mosquitoes by the billions. It is an evil coast, and it was hard to think of a man fighting it alone.\(^{72}\)

Rockefeller’s romantic swim and the still more romantic search for signs of his body (or even his miraculous survival) stirred American imaginations far more than his own fascination with Asmat artistic “remnants of a marvelous past.”\(^{73}\) New Guinea appeared in *National Geographic*’s first U.S. publication of colour photos from the territory as one of two mysteries (along with outer space) that could still fascinate the spirit. The “very name quickens the pulse” in “this living museum of tropical man” poised at “that fleeting moment when man’s nightmare past lay within the grasp of the present.” Although the magazine described emerging nationalism, that quickly gave way to a breathless account of the presence of skulls among the “childlike” headhunters of this “last frontier.”\(^{74}\)

The land merged with the people in explorers’ stories. Heinrich Harrer’s 1962 mission to the interior aimed at both conquering the last unclimbed mountain, and unearthing the secrets of the Dani people. Harrer “left civilization behind” to “travel back in time 3,000 or even 5,000 years before Christ” on a visit to “the biggest Natural History Museum in the world.” His account combined with reports from the Harvard anthropologists to make the Dani the predominant representatives of West New Guinea in the U.S. popular imagination: Harrer portrayed them as wild children, unpredictable as puppies, capable of enormous and thoughtless cruelties as well as such “richly comic” moments as a “Christian Dior show” in which Dani porters donned Western clothes for a mountain ascent with little regard to the function of any garment.\(^{75}\) To Americans, the most noticeable thing about the Dani was
their near-naked state and the *kateka* (penis-gourd) their men wore, seeming to express an unseemly obsession with male sexuality or a childlike display. Popular images of West New Guinea, in sum, suggested a “primitive, poor, forbidding land” without “a single positive element of civilization” that could not hope to join the family of nations any time soon. A war over control of this land seemed absurd, yet one loomed nevertheless. With these underlying perceptions, U.S. policymakers could hardly comprehend working for self-determination, but only for a solution – any solution – that would remove the Papuan bone of contention from international politics.

In January 1962, then, Kennedy announced that the United States was actively working for a deal over West New Guinea. Acting UN Secretary General U Thant also acceded to U.S. urging and called on both sides to “come together to seek a peaceful solution of the problem.” Successive Indonesian governments had failed in all their previous UN diplomacy to pass a resolution calling for bilateral talks. Confrontation diplomacy had won just that, a call for talks from the UN secretariat. At the same time, Kennedy loyalists took over key State Department posts in the November 1961 “Thanksgiving Day massacre,” and began to break department resistance to the White House tack on West New Guinea. Washington accepted Ambassador Jones’s advice not to join with its European allies and Canada as they slapped arms embargoes on Indonesia. U.S. representatives to NATO argued that their government was carrying the burden alone in Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam, and could not risk being outflanked by a pro-communist Indonesia; since it was unwilling to abandon Indonesia to the communist bloc, American arms supplies were vital to keeping the lines open. Washington went further, denying permission for Dutch troop reinforcements to pass through American territory on the grounds that it “would destroy our usefulness in helping to bring about a peaceful solution through discussion.”

The Kennedy administration was desperate to avoid an all-out war. “It would have been white men against the Africans, the Asians, and the Communists,” Robert Kennedy recalled. “It would have been a very bad, a very dangerous situation.” The administration already faced a divisive internal battle
over civil rights that raised issues of American identity and racial inclusion. Its foreign policy aimed at winning over the global South, inhabited mainly by peoples of color. It backed civil rights for African-Americans in part to avoid condemnation by African and Asian governments. That approach would have been undermined by any conflict pitting Europeans against third world countries along racial lines. The Kennedy administration saw West New Guinea as such a conflict in the making, and acted to avoid this disastrous outcome. The fact that Pauans were also creating a third world nationalist movement for their own independence did not intrude on U.S. thinking, shaped as it was by ideas of primitive frontiers not yet ready for modernization. This thinking underlined the presence of both change and continuity in Kennedy administration foreign policy. Facing decolonization in Africa, the Eisenhower administration had accepted some accommodation, but worked to ensure the maintenance of the basic architecture of an international system in which white domination remained. Kennedy’s foreign policy retained that emphasis, but accepted the need for a more positive attitude toward decolonization and third world nationalism. If Sukarno’s “new emerging forces” concept posed a systemic challenge, Kennedy’s response was to try to channel Indonesian nationalism into “constructive” channels of economic development, to turn it inwards to the challenges inside Indonesia. His administration was even more deaf to the Papuan nationalist challenge for a changed understanding of decolonization and identity categories. With conceptions of the primitive in the background, the administration acted on its own mental maps. Those privileged the global over the local and saw autonomous regional developments mostly through Cold War lenses.

In February 1962, amidst growing fears that Sukarno would opt for a communist future, Robert Kennedy traveled to Jakarta and the Hague to press both sides to negotiate. The Dutch had already dropped their promise to Papuan leaders that talks must endorse the Papuan right to self-determination. Indonesia’s precondition was that “purpose of talks should be to effect transfer of administration of West New Guinea.” The attorney general’s job in Jakarta was to convince Sukarno to drop this
demand. U.S. diplomatic cables claimed this mission accomplished, saying Sukarno had accepted talks without preconditions. However, Sukarno’s next major speech insisted upon “negotiations which really discuss the procedures as to how the Dutch shall transfer the administration, the authority, over West Irian. . . . We clearly reject negotiations without condition.” Kennedy went on to the Hague, where he told the Dutch prime minister and cabinet directly that the United States would not support them.

Unofficial talks finally opened in March 1962, at the Huntlands estate near Washington. Indonesian negotiator Adam Malik sought a direct transfer of administration. His Dutch counterpart J.H. van Roijen sought a transfer to the United Nations followed by an act of self-determination before Indonesia could take over. The job of reconciling these positions fell to Ellsworth Bunker, an American diplomat officially acting on behalf of U Thant who in fact reported to Washington. Bunker’s eventual formula for a settlement was a clever synthesis: it took the Dutch idea of transfer to the UN, grafted it onto Subandrio’s notion that one or two years of interim administration would be acceptable, accepted Jakarta’s adamant demand that transfer to Indonesia was a given, and retained the Dutch desire for an eventual act of self-determination. However, by putting transfer to Indonesia first and self-determination later, the plan favored the Indonesian position.

With the Bunker formula in play, talks paused to allow each team to consult its government. Kennedy put his personal prestige behind the formula. Sukarno swiftly accepted talks “on the basis” of Bunker’s plan. Luns however professed his government “deeply hurt” that the U.S. government was backing “appeasement.” In April Washington asked the British and Australian governments to urge the Bunker plan on the Dutch; both accepted American reasoning that Western interests were being harmed by a prolonged conflict, and agreed to endorse Bunker’s solution. Kennedy put the case bluntly to
Dutch prime minister J.E. de Quay, arguing that the strategic interests of the West had to take priority over Papuan self-determination:

This would be a war in which neither The Netherlands nor the West could win in any real sense. Whatever the outcome of particular military encounters, the entire free world position in Asia would be seriously damaged. Only the communists would benefit from such a conflict. If the Indonesian Army were committed to an all out war against The Netherlands, the moderate elements within the army and the country would be quickly eliminated leaving a clear field for communist intervention. If Indonesia were to succumb to communism in these circumstances the whole non-communist position in Viet-Nam, Thailand and Malaya would be in grave peril and as you know these are areas in which we in the United States have heavy commitments.

American commitments in Vietnam rested on the domino theory: if Vietnam fell, the rest of Southeast Asia would come toppling down. The dominoes, Kennedy argued, could also be pushed over from the southern end of the chain. White House policy proceeded, not from the merits of the West New Guinea issue, but from the perceived needs of regional strategy. With principles like self-determination seen as irrelevant to stone age New Guinea, there was no countervailing impulse of principle versus realpolitik.

De Quay responded with a parallel between Dutch reinforcements in West New Guinea and Western reinforcements in Berlin, calling them resolute symbols of resistance to aggression. Unmoved, Washington acted to head off any interference with the Bunker plan’s progress by Papuan nationalists. The Dutch self-determination plan had originally envisioned the New Guinea Council recommending further steps toward self-government on its first anniversary, 5 April 1962. For Indonesian policymakers, this deadline and the fear that Papuan nationalists would use it to declare immediate independence loomed over the Huntlands talks. American officials sought and obtained Dutch assurances that there would be no April Papuan independence declaration.

In the Bunker plan, the broad outlines of the eventual peace deal were clear. However, there were five more months of intermittent battles, megaphone diplomacy, threats and counter-threats before the two sides inked the deal. The Indonesian diplomatic style in this period was to alternately advance demands, then retract them as apparent concessions, all the time keeping the adversary off balance through calculated unpredictability. Continuing Indonesian infiltrations aimed to establish a
military presence on the ground, and to back up the diplomatic campaign. Dutch diplomacy, on the other hand, tended to a series of grudging concessions that always came too late to meet escalating Indonesian demands. After sustained U.S. pressure, the Netherlands announced it accepted the Bunker plan “in principle.” Sukarno demanded a Dutch statement of willingness to transfer West New Guinea before permitting Malik to return to the bargaining table. On 22 May Bunker reported “Luns is playing us for suckers,” and the State Department formally requested the Dutch government accept the Bunker plan in its entirety. The next day, Thant informed them he would publish the plan if they did not make a clear acceptance soon; a day later Kennedy publicly endorsed it, and de Quay finally accepted talks “on the basis of” Bunker’s timeline. Sukarno conducted a subsequent quarrel by cable with Thant on whether or not this meant acceptance, until the Dutch government delivered a formal statement of willingness to transfer administration.  

Papuan nationalist leaders felt betrayed as the Netherlands, step by agonizing step, accepted the Bunker plan. Based on the promise of independence, they had defined their identity in opposition to Indonesia, but now faced the prospect of early Indonesian rule. They denounced outside powers for selling them in a “slave trade” to the Indonesians. Gradually, however, Papuan leaders realized that they were going to be ruled by Jakarta, like it or not. A student delegation left for the Indonesian capital, with its leader explaining: “since Bunker forwarded his proposals for the settlement of West Irian, we then understood that our future lies in Djakarta.” Yet allegiance was temporary, seeking the best terms possible until the promised self-determination could be exercised in 1969. As Hilsman conceded, the majority of politically active Papuans wanted independence, while the minority group (headed by Silas Papare) “views Djakarta as a partner in expelling the Dutch [but] wants no interference in Papuan affairs.”

Only with the Dutch surrender to Bunker’s terms did Western pressure shift to Jakarta, with the United States and its allies pressing the Indonesians to negotiate. The most detailed account of the talks
cites this pressure as evidence that the Kennedy administration did not favor the Indonesian side, but this thesis is only possible by glossing over the events of 1961 and early 1962. There was nothing in the Bunker plan that Sukarno or Subandrio had not already accepted, save the idea of a genuine act of self-determination. The next round of talks reduced this provision to a hollow face-saving measure for Dutch pride. Bunker’s timeline foresaw the Dutch handing over to a UN interim administration, which would in turn hand over to Indonesian control, with a final act of self-determination several years later. Two main issues remained: the means of self-determination, and the question of the UN administration. Indonesia still wanted a direct transfer; Subandrio had indicated that he was willing to offer the quid pro quo of an act of self-determination after the Indonesian take-over. In the course of talks, Dutch representatives abandoned the substance of self-determination in exchange for the semblance. Their top priority was to avoid the humiliation of direct transfer to Indonesia, their second to preserve the appearance of promises made to Papuan leaders. Luns was rock solid on just one point: there would be no direct transfer. To gain this point, Dutch negotiators did not hold out for a UN-run plebiscite. In the final agreement they accepted the erasure of the word Papuans in favor of “inhabitants.”

Self-determination had been a mantra for Dutch leaders, and they had expected the same from Washington. Van Roijen tried to convince Kennedy that self-determination was as sacred in West New Guinea as it was in West Berlin. “Oh, that is entirely different,” he remembered Kennedy replying, “because there are something like two and a quarter million West Berliners whereas there are only seven hundred thousand of those Papuans.” Where West Berliners were “highly civilized and highly cultured,” the Papuans lived “in the Stone Age.” Meanwhile Bunker told reporters: “The country itself is not viable,” since its people were “largely backward.” He thought only “a very small part of the population today is capable of exercising self-determination, or any determination of anything for that matter.” Stone age perceptions rendered self-determination irrelevant to U.S. policymakers.
The final agreement called for seven months of UN administration, followed by an Indonesian takeover and an Indonesian-run “act of free choice” by 1969. In an oddly anticlimactic speech, Sukarno noted the victory and promised to turn to the provision of basic needs – music to White House ears. Kennedy immediately wrote to propose closer U.S.-Indonesian cooperation. A national security action memorandum suggested the settlement “be put to constructive use” by redirecting Jakarta’s attention from nationalist expansion toward rational development planning, and building up the army. “These are two major elements of a long-run strategy to keep Indonesia non-Communist and to begin to give that country some forward momentum.”

The influence of modernization theory was evident. If one of the great dangers of Indonesian focus on the struggle for West Irian had been that it kept Indonesia at a vulnerable stage of underdevelopment, then the conflict’s end spelled an opportunity to set Indonesia back on the proper development path. American expertise could help here. So too could the youthful athleticism and hopeful spirit represented in the Peace Corps. From this perspective, the settlement of the West New Guinea dispute was as much a victory for the United States as it was for Indonesia.

West New Guinea was the first territory to come under direct UN administration. That was, in the title of one UN pamphlet, “an unprecedented story.” Yet the task was not to prepare the territory for self-government, but to provide cover for it to come under Indonesian rule. The United Nations governed for seven months; Indonesian administrators took over on 1 May 1963. Sukarno pursued a more development-minded course for several months, but by the end of 1963 the demands of national unity led him to declare a state of confrontation against the British-sponsored Federation of Malaysia that took Indonesia into an increasingly anti-Western posture. A military coup toppled Sukarno in 1965-66. The new government headed by General Suharto agreed to hold the promised act of free choice in 1969, but only to prove Indonesia abided by its treaties. In a stage-managed exercise, the Indonesian-
selected representatives voted unanimously to remain with Indonesia; there were no U.S. objections although a few African states protested. A Papuan independence movement fought on throughout Suharto’s era, reemerging as an urban political movement after the fall of Suharto in 1999. One of its main demands has been for the Indonesian annexation to be reviewed and the historical record to be set straight (pelurusan sejarah). In trying to resolve the West New Guinea dispute, the Kennedy administration merely postponed the reckoning.

If the administration’s goal was a peaceful settlement in West New Guinea, it failed. The plain talk of White House officials, however, indicated another aim entirely: a holding action in Indonesia to protect the rear area of a new war on the Southeast Asian mainland. The Kennedy administration’s handling of the West New Guinea dispute was neither effective as long-term conflict resolution, nor supportive of decolonization. Kennedy’s “success” was to avert military action by ensuring Indonesian demands were satisfied at the bargaining table, not on the battlefield. West New Guinea exemplified the administration’s crisis management approach, which paid little attention to long-term conflict resolution or to the issues on the ground. Kennedy provided a short-term fix that created long-term instability, as is often the case when complex international disputes are approached solely through the prism of U.S. grand strategies. The West New Guinea case adds weight to the understanding of Kennedy’s foreign policy as improvisational and reactive.

It also underlines the influence of background perceptions on policymaking. U.S. strategy had no place for an independent Papua – a land that appeared on policymakers’ mental maps only as a peripheral remnant of the stone age, caught in an earlier stage of development. Papuan efforts to deploy racial identity as a diplomatic asset represented a nationalist movement trying to shape an emergent national identity and exert some control over understandings of “race.” These efforts had some success in Africa. They could not, however, penetrate Kennedy administration thinking, where racial imaginings stemmed from the American experience and the arena of Cold War decolonization. Policymakers in
Washington cast Indonesia as an exemplar of a third world colored nation, an adolescent country that could perhaps be directed into the right constructive channels by wise American policy. Papuans were merely childlike savages, hence unable to stake their own nationalist claims. Rostow’s “stages of development” and Fifield’s “islands of development” concepts came together to create spatial and temporal imaginings of places of development. The image of a stone age land incapable of self-determination reinforced the Cold War-driven desire to placate Indonesia. To U.S. policymakers, Indonesia had a multitude of problems, but at least potentially qualified as a dynamic place of development. West New Guinea, pictured through hazy images of swamps and savages, cannibals and *kotekas*, did not.

---

This article was assisted through a year as Harris Steel postdoctoral fellow at the University of Western Ontario. I am very grateful for comments on earlier drafts from Steven Hugh Lee, Danilyn Rutherford, Bradley R. Simpson and Andrew Webster, and to the very helpful comments from the anonymous readers.

1 Even to name the territory in question is to reveal a bias. The Dutch called it Netherlands New Guinea; the Indonesians Irian Barat (West Irian) and later Irian Jaya (Victorious Irian); the indigenous nationalist movement eventually declared their country to be Papua Barat (West Papua), while some later preferred West Melanesia. The Indonesian government has now accepted the name Papua. This paper uses the terms interchangeably, favoring West New Guinea as the most recognizable term. The people of the territory are referred to with their own preferred term, Papuans.


Onnie Lumintang et al, *Pahlawan Nasional Martin Indey dan Silas Papare [National Heroes Martin Indey and Silas Papare]* (Jakarta: Putri Sejati Raya, 1997); Paul W. van der Veur, “Political Awakening in West New Guinea.” *Pacific Affairs* 36 no. 1 (1963); Richard Chauvel, “‘We were traded as goats by the Americans’: Papuan nationalism and the West New Guinea dispute,” in Chauvel, *Land of Papua*.


The Politics of Expectation (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1973); and Paterson, Kennedy’s Quest for Victory. New scholarship on such conflicts as the war in Vietnam has helped to create a more nuanced view of Kennedy as “cautious rather than bold, hesitant rather than decisive, and improvisational rather than carefully calculating.”


15 Hilsman, 23.


17 Robert D. Dean, Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).


34 Record of conversation between Indonesian first minister Djuanda Kartawidjayja and Australian foreign minister Sir Garfield Barwick, 3 July 1962, National Archives of Australia, A1209, 1962/705; Adam Malik, *In the Service of*
the Republic (Singapore: Gunung Agung, 1980), 240-1; Michael Leifer, *Indonesia’s Foreign Policy* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 63; Fifield, 256.


Hunt, 81.


Maga, 56.


Rostow oral history, 88-9, JFKL.


54 Voice of the Negroids, 5.


57 Rostow to Kennedy, 9 Oct. 1961, JFKL, NSF box 205.


60 Robert Johnson to Kennedy, 30 Nov. 1961, JFKL, NSF box 423.


63 Heroes’ Day speech, IO, 11 Nov. 1961; speech to army leadership, IO, 1 Dec. 1961; speech to Indonesian Women’s Movement (Gerwani), IO, 16 Dec. 1961. There were echoes throughout the country, for instance the order of the North Sulawesi regional commander, in M. Silaban, *Irian Barat* (Medan: Pustaka Sri, 1963), 54-6.


65 Sukarno to Kennedy, JFKL NSF box 113.


68 Jones to Rusk, 15 Dec. 1961, JFKL, NSF box 205; Jones to Rusk, 8 Jan. 1962, JFKL, NSF box 205a; *Pahlawan Nasional*.

69 Simpson, 45.

70 A typical adventure tale is C.G. Rawling, *The Land of the New Guinea Pygmies: An Account of a Pioneer Journey of Exploration into the Heart of New Guinea* (London: Seeley, Service and Co., 1913), which offers a relatively positive account of Papuans as “one of the finest animals in creation” (58). On the role of anthropologists in the


80 Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Schulman, eds., Robert Kennedy in His Own Words (Toronto: Bantam, 1988), 315-6.


83 Jones to Rusk, 18 Feb. 1962, JFKL, NSF box 206; draft letter from president to attorney general, 22 Feb. 1962, JFKL, NSF box 423; Robert Kennedy to Rusk and John Kennedy, 14 Feb. 1962, FRUS 1961-3, 23: 525-6; Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy, 615; Sukarno, Indonesia Wants Negotiations on the West Irian Problem Based on Transfer of Administration from Netherlands to Indonesia, speech on 21 Feb. 1962 (Jakarta: Department of Information, 1962), 6-7.


85 Stevenson to Rusk, 15 March 1962, JFKL, NSF box 206; Markin, 15-17, 144; McMullen, Mediation.


87 Rusk to London, 2 April 1962; Rusk to Canberra, 5 April 1962, JFKL NSF box 206; briefing paper for visit of Prime Minister Robert Menzies, 16 June 1962, JFKL NSF box 8; record of conversation between Subandrio and Barwick, 3 July 1962, National Archives of Australia, A1209, 1962/705.

88 Kennedy to Prime Minister J.E. de Quay, 2 April 1962, JFKL, NSF box 143.

89 De Quay to Kennedy, 14 April 1962, JFKL, POF box 122a.
90 Henderson to Rusk, 23 March 1961; Rusk to Rice, 23 March 1961; Rusk to Rice, 31 March 1962; Rice to Rusk, 1 April 1962, JFKL, NSF, box 206.


92 IO, 14 July and 16 July 1962.


94 Markin, The West Irian Dispute.

95 Jones to Rusk, 26 March 1962, JFKL, POF box 119.


97 J. Herman van Roijen (Interviewee), recorded interview by Joseph E. O’Connor (interviewer), 28 Oct. 1966 (p. 3) JFKL Oral History Program; off-the-record press briefing by Bunker, 1 June 1962, JFKL, NSF box 423.

