

Lumumba
Film reviews

Guys:

A question to ponder about this film: how much of what has happened and is happening to this day in the Congo (ironically named Democratic Republic of the Congo)—the chaos, the brutality, the civil wars, the mass kidnapping of children and the rape of women, and the deaths of millions of innocent civilians—the fault of the Africans themselves and how much of it is the fault of outsiders (specifically the West, which includes the United States).

For many of you the events portrayed in the film will of course be bewildering given your lack of awareness of the history of the Congo and the role played by the United States in that country. The reviews below will give you a brief but helpful overview of key facts of context that should help you understand the film better. As you will probably guess, I do not place this film in the typical Hollywood genre because it is made from the perspective of Africa, not the West. Another question to ponder: would ordinary U.S. Americans (especially whites) go view a film like this one? Whatever your answer.... Why?

Lumumba

Review by Roger Ebert Jul 27, 2001

Why does the United States so often back the reactionary side in international disputes? Why do we fight against liberation movements, and in favor of puppets who make things comfy for multinational corporations? Having built a great democracy, why are we fearful of democracy elsewhere? Such thoughts occurred as I watched "Lumumba," the story of how the United States conspired to bring about the death of the Congo's democratically elected Patrice Lumumba--and to sponsor in his place Joseph Mobutu, a dictator, murderer and thief who continued for nearly four decades to enjoy American sponsorship.

Pondering the histories of the Congo and other troubled lands of recent decades, we're tempted to wonder if the world might not better reflect our ideals if we had not intervened in those countries. American foreign policy has consistently reflected not American ideals but American investment interests, and you can see that today in the rush toward Bush's insane missile shield. There is little evidence it will work, it will be obsolete even if it does, and yet as the largest peacetime public works project in American history is it a gold mine for the defense industries and their friends and investors.

Patrice Lumumba is a footnote to this larger story. Raoul Peck's film (a feature, not a documentary) begins with his assassinated body being dug up by Belgian soldiers so it can be hacked into smaller pieces and burned in oil drums. Lumumba's disfigured corpse begins the narration that runs through the film. He recalls his early days as a beer salesman, a trade that helps him develop a talent for speaking and leadership. As it happens, the beer he promotes has a rival owned by Joseph Kasa Vubu--who later becomes president while Lumumba is named prime minister and defense minister. It is Kasa Vubu who eventually orders the arrest that leads to Lumumba's murder.

In the 1950s, Lumumba becomes a leader of the Congolese National Movement. His abilities are spotted early by the Belgians, who after a century of inhuman despoliation of a once-prosperous land, are fearful of powerful Africans. Lumumba is jailed, beaten, and then released to fly to Brussels for the conference granting the Congo its freedom. He takes office to find the armed forces still commanded by the white officers who tortured him, and when he tries to replace one of the most evil, he is targeted by the CIA, the Belgians and the resident whites as a dangerous man, and his fate is sealed.

Most of the natural riches in the Congo are concentrated in the Katanga province, which declared independence from the mother country, in a coup masterminded by the West. Lumumba's attempts to put down this rebellion got him tagged as a communist, particularly when he considered asking the Russians to support the central government. Well, of course the opportunistic Russians would have been glad to oblige--but why did a democratic leader need help from the Russians to protect himself from the Western democracies? The movie re-creates scenes that will be familiar, from another angle, to readers of Barbara Kingsolver's great novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, which tells the story of an American missionary family that finds itself in the Congo at about the same time. Jailed by Kasa Vubu, Lumumba escapes and tries to flee with his family to a safe haven, but is captured and shot by a firing squad, without a trial.

We do not learn much about Lumumba the man. Eriq Ebouaney, a French actor whose family is from Cameroon, plays Lumumba as a stubborn, fiery leader, good at speeches, but unskilled at strategy and diplomacy. Time and again, we see him making decisions that may be right but are dangerous to him personally. Although the narration is addressed to his wife, we learn little about her, his family or his personal life; he is used primarily as a guide through the milestones of the Congo's brief two-month experiment with democracy.

Writer-director Peck has a long-standing interest in Lumumba and made a documentary about him in 1991. He is a Haitian by birth, a onetime cultural minister there, and so knows firsthand how despotic regimes find sponsorship from Western capital. His film is strong, bloody and sad. He does not editorialize about Mobutu, except in one montage of shattering power. On his throne, guarded by soldiers with machine guns, Mobutu gives a speech on his country's second Independence Day. Mobutu asks for a

moment of silence in Lumumba's memory, and as the moment begins, Peck cuts away to show the execution, burial, disinterment, dismemberment and burning of Lumumba--and then back again to Mobutu's throne as the moment of silence ends. Copyright © 2001 Chicago Sun-Times

'Lumumba': Recalling the Fight Over Congo

washingtonpost.com

By Stephen Hunter

Washington Post Staff Writer

Friday, July 13, 2001; Page C05

Patrice Lumumba was shot to death in 1961 at the age of 35 for, it seems, the crime of being Patrice Lumumba. Of that, he was undoubtedly guilty.

He has since entered legend, black African martyr category, for his stand against colonialism and his stand for independence (whether for freedom, however, is a different question), his unquenchable will and courage, and the contempt with which he was extinguished. He's up there with Steve Biko in post-colonial heaven, looking down, still guilty of being Patrice Lumumba.

His story is told with admirable crispness and a surprising lack of bias by the director Raoul Peck, and brilliantly acted by the French actor Eriq Ebouaney, in "Lumumba." Though the material, with its invocations of imperial ruthlessness, tribal violence, even race war, has a great incendiary potential, the film's most admirable quality is its restraint; it's not a highly politicized document.

Peck, a former Haitian minister of culture-turned-filmmaker (and Lumumba fanatic) is no Costa-Gavras, who finds the same imperialist plot in every country; he's more like the socialist filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo, who made the brilliant "Battle of Algiers." Like Pontecorvo, Peck is wise enough to know that both sides have their share of fiends, fools, drunks and perverts – and heroes. The movie stays far away from rhetoric. The facts are brutal enough without inflation.

Lumumba, a natural orator (and salesman), had a vision of a united Congo. It might have been self-serving, for he came from a small, powerless tribe and if the tribal unit was de-emphasized politically, it was people such as himself who would benefit. This was a dangerous position, given the unholy tribalism of the Congo, exacerbated by the colonizers' utter indifference in drawing up national boundaries by which they meant to divide the loot. Lumumba was a marked man from about every direction.

The Belgians hated him for being a Congolese nationalist, the opposing tribal parties hated him for being essentially anti-tribe, the Americans hated him for being pro-Moscow (the movie doesn't pretend otherwise, as many a dishonest leftist film might), and his protegee and ultimate betrayer, Joseph Mobutu, hated him for not being Joseph Mobutu. It's a surprise Lumumba lasted as long as he did.

Ebouaney gets the man's charisma brilliantly – more so, I would say, than did Denzel Washington as Biko in Richard Attenborough's "Cry Freedom." In fact, in every way this is a better film than that treacly evocation of virtue at the expense of truth.

Peck's Lumumba is no saint who only did the right things and was crushed on account of it. He was, rather, quite human: He was capable of inflammatory rhetoric (he talked before he thought, too frequently) and consummate bad judgment.

It was under his stewardship as prime minister that an obscure sergeant, Joseph Mobutu (Alex Descas, in another fine performance), was picked (with Lumumba's backing) to head the Force Publique, which soon became the Congolese Liberation Army. Memo to Patrice: Bad career move. The army, under Mobutu, turned out to be instrumental in his downfall. At the same time, he never worked out a relationship with the Katangese nationalist Moise Tshombe, who hated him so much that he rebelled against the national government (with Belgian support).

In fact, it could be argued that Lumumba really didn't do much; he was prime minister for only a few months before an army revolt, a provincial secession and a series of massacres plunged the country into chaos and the Belgians intervened to protect their citizens (read: white people), at which time Lumumba was put under house arrest by the army. But he was more dangerous as a symbol than as a politician. (He was a little like Malcolm X in this way.) As chaos and civil war deepened, he began urging Russian involvement in the wrangle that had become Congolese politics.

Peck sticks close to the latest evidence in accounts of the death, which discounts involvement by the CIA: He was murdered through an alliance between the Belgians and the Katangese with the willing acquiescence of Mobutu. In fact the death itself is intercut with images from the later Mobutu reign, by which time the soldier had become an insane despot, wearing a leopard skin fez and a custom-made short-sleeve suit jacket, a man who presided over the most corrupt government on earth while sitting on the world's grandest throne. It makes Lumumba's death more bitter, for it suggests that it was for nothing.

The movie contains a great deal of information, and it can overwhelm the inattentive or those unwilling to do a little background reading before they attend. But it's made with a classically restrained clarity that acquires great power as it rolls along to that glade of trees in Katanga province and the lethal bark of rifles in the night. Copyright © 2001 The Washington Post Company

Raoul Peck's movie "Lumumba"

a discussion by journalist D'Lynn Waldron, Ph.D., of the movie, Patrice Lumumba, and the Independence of the Congo from Belgium.

The movie Lumumba is a fast paced, powerful, homage to the martyred African leader Patrice Lumumba, which tells his tragic personal story with shocking realism.

Raoul Peck devoted ten years to creating this movie which is focused on Lumumba the person, rather than detailing the complex economic and political factors that caused the disaster in the Congo and were the reasons for Lumumba's assassination.

The two hour constraint of a theatrical movie forced Peck to edit his movie down to just the times between when Lumumba began actively campaigning for Independence, through the Brussels Conference that set the date for Independence, and then between Lumumba's election as Prime Minister, through his assassination.

This film is very much Lumumba's personal story and after the movie, some members of the audience who were not familiar with the history of the Congo gathered around me for more background.

I was particularly concerned that they understand it was well known before independence that the Belgian government and foreign economic interests were fomenting chaos from which they could take back the mineral rich areas of Katanga and the Kasai, while abandoning the unprofitable remainder of the Congo.

I was very pleased the movie made it clear that the West labeled Lumumba a 'communist' and a 'puppet of Russia' as an excuse to destroy him, because he was the one person who could have held the Congo together and prevented the foreign interests from taking back Katanga and the Kasai.

Mr. Peck makes a point of the fact that Lumumba was not a communist and feared Russia. I know this was so because I was with Lumumba in his living room in Stanleyville when Lumumba got the telegram that said that Gizenga, instead of staying in Accra for training with Nkruma's people, had been taken straight from the airport in an Aeroflot plane to Moscow. Lumumba was terrified by this and said to me, "The Russians will use Gizenga as my Judas." (However, Gizenga's subsequent life indicates that the Russians would have found him as dedicated to the Congo and as difficult to dictate to as Lumumba. (See the e-mail about their family's travails written to me by Dorothee Gizenga in July 30, 2003.)

The one scene in the movie with which I would quibble is an imaginary one in which Lumumba tells Kasavubu that he must bring in Russian troops to restore order because everyone else has betrayed him, including America and the UN. Indeed everyone had betrayed him, but Lumumba had only threatened to bring in Russian troops in order to force Eisenhower to send the American troops which Lumumba had repeatedly requested.

Lumumba's only interest was the good of the Congo, for which there had to be a united Congo. Therefore, the West, the Russians, and the politicians with tribal areas they wanted to break away, all wanted Lumumba dead.

The actor who plays Lumumba, Eriq Ebouaney, does an excellent job of showing Lumumba's humanity and lack of guile. Physically, the Lumumba I knew was much taller, thinner and younger-looking.

Lumumba had the manner of a schoolteacher rather than a politician, and though he could be upset by the very upsetting circumstances around him, his natural turn of mind was scholarly and dispassionately analytical, as one can tell by reading his writings.

All of the Congolese politicians are played by actors who look remarkably like them. However, I knew several of the whites and they did not look like the fat, florid, middle-aged and older, actors who play them. Unlike that, the real Frank Carlucci (later US Secretary of Defense) was a 29-year-old, lean, handsome young Italian-American, who was Lumumba's "friend" and one of the engineers of his downfall. I feel that using young, clean-cut white actors where appropriate would have made the evil they were capable of more shocking.

Mr. Peck has said that his aim was to use the tragedy of Lumumba as a case study of a tragedy being repeated all over the world in countries that are struggling for democratic government and economic sovereignty. Charismatic, idealistic leaders like Lumumba are displaced by schemers after personal power and profit who are often supported by outside interests which pay them handsomely to allow their country to be economically exploited and environmentally ravaged.

Had Lumumba been willing to compromise his ideals and his country, he could have been a dictator for decades and become the billionaire puppet of foreign economic interests, as Mobutu did. Instead Lumumba chose martyrdom.

I congratulate Mr. Peck and thank him for the decade of devotion he has put into bringing Lumumba's story to the screen. I hope the DVD will include the very articulate Mr. Peck's commentary and remarks, plus additional historical materials.

[...]

- In the spring of 1960, I was the only foreign correspondent covering Patrice Lumumba in Stanleyville just before Independence, and as such and an American, I became Lumumba's confidant and the one he entrusted to mediate between himself and the Belgian administration and to get the word to Eisenhower and the American people that he was absolutely not a Communist, that he feared Russia, that he admired America, and that he wanted President Eisenhower to have his people come to America for a

crash course in administration before Independence.

- It was well known in the Congo before Independence that Belgium and the banking and mining interests were arranging for the coming Independence to disintegrate into chaos so they could take back Katanga with its gold, uranium and copper, and the Kasai with its industrial diamonds, while dumping the unprofitable remainder of the Congo.

- The "White Congolese" of Belgian descent were even more aware of this and more angered by the betrayal of a trust, than almost any "Black African", except Patrice Lumumba. It was these disaffected White Congolese, and especially the colonial governor of Kasai, who told me exactly what the plans of the banking and mining interests were. I even have their hand-drawn maps showing the parts of the country that would be reclaimed from the chaos. The governor of Kasai was so disgusted with the Belgian government that he took down from his wall his prized historical maps of the Congo and handed them to me (I still have them).

- Before I went up the Congo River to Stanleyville, which was Lumumba's political headquarters, I had read newspaper stories and been told by some people in the Belgian Colonial Administration that Lumumba was a madman and a Communist puppet of Russia. What I found was a thoughtful, dignified, dedicated man who naively believed that if his idol Eisenhower were told the truth, Eisenhower would no longer listen to the Belgian lie that he, Lumumba, was a Communist.

- My cabled newspaper stories had things added and removed by Scripps-Howard, and all references to Lumumba's admiration for America and his requests to President Eisenhower for training for his people were cut out.

- Lumumba rightly believed that the Russians didn't like him any more than the Belgians did, because he was not a Communist and because he would never do the bidding of any foreign power. Lumumba only wanted what was best for the Congo and that was his death warrant. The Russians would have killed Lumumba, if the Western powers hadn't done it first.

- I was with Lumumba in his living room in Stanleyville when Lumumba got the telegram which said that instead of Gizenga's staying in Accra for training with Nkruma's people, Gizenga had been taken straight from the airport in an Aeroflot plane to Moscow. Lumumba was terrified by this and said to me, "The Russians will use Gizenga as my Judas." However, Gizenga's subsequent life indicates that the Russians would have found him as dedicated to the Congo and as difficult to dictate to as Lumumba. (See the e-mail about their family's travails written to me by [Dorothee Gizenga](#) in July 30, 2003.)

- (The Russians had thought they would be able to wrap Gizenga in Lumumba's mantle and take control of the Congo. Gizenga did establish himself as Lumumba's heir in the Eastern Congo, but, like the rest of the Congo, the area descended into tribal war, plus Maoist inspired massacres aimed at the 'elite', which included anyone who could read, or even wore eyeglasses.)

- Lumumba looked to America as his dream of what the Congo could be, and ironically it was Eisenhower who ordered his assassination.

- Before Independence, I know from personal knowledge, that Lumumba asked Eisenhower to provide training in government administration for Congolese, who the Belgians had deliberately kept from learning the most basic skills necessary to run a country. Eisenhower replied that would be interfering in Belgium's internal affairs, a position which was later repeated to me by the State Department.

- After Independence, when the Congo needed international assistance to restore order, Prime Minister Lumumba asked Eisenhower to send American troops. However, Eisenhower continued to falsely label Lumumba a Communist and handed Lumumba's unwanted request over to Dag Hammarskjold. Hammarskjold, along with Conor Cruise-O'Brien, was part of the cabal that used the UN to destroy the Congo's Independence, in order to take back Katanga on behalf of Western mining interests.

- To try to force Eisenhower to send American troops to restore order in the Congo, Lumumba threatened to bring in Russians troops. This was highly publicized by the American government, and no mention was made of the fact that this was only a threat and Lumumba was appealing to Eisenhower to send American troops. (see the book *Congo Cables* with the actual cables to and from Washington regarding the Congo and Lumumba, as assembled by Madeline Kalb)

Right up to his being turned over to Katanga to be assassinated, Lumumba pinned his hopes on America and his travelling companion and confidant was Frank Carlucci, who it has since been revealed in Congressional investigations was an American intelligence officer and presumably part of Operation Zaire Rifle, the American plot of assassinate Lumumba.

- I left the Congo overland just before Independence through the Ruanda and Urundi and the Mountains of the Moon to bring Lumumba's requests for help addressed to President Eisenhower to the American Consulate in Uganda, because mail and cables were being stopped by the Belgian postal authorities. The American consulate refused to accept anything from Lumumba. They said he would have to use the Belgian Post and Telegraph in the Congo for any messages he wanted to send to President Eisenhower.

For more information on the film and where it can be seen, go to the Zeitgeist Web site:
<http://www.zeitgeistfilm.com/current/lumumba/lumumba.html>

For those who would like to read a brief history of the Congo, I highly recommend the excellent concise summary by the military historian, Dr. Robert Craig Johnson, which can be found at <http://worldatwar.net/chandelle/v2/v2n3/congo.html>

For those who want to know the details of the Belgian government complicity in the assassination Lumumba, there is a new book by Ludo De Witt, "The Assassination of Lumumba" published by Verso in English in America, Canada and the UK in August

2001. 224 pages (in painfully small type), illustrated, hardback \$27. ISBN 1 85984 618 1 Web site:
http://www.versobooks.com/books/cdef/de_witte_lumumba.shtml

For the first time, De Witt was able to look at long secret Belgian Government documents, and some of the Belgians who had participated the murder of Lumumba, now old men unburdened their consciences to De Witt.

De Witt's book forced the Belgian Parliament to open an investigation into the assassination of Lumumba, after forty years!

I have a detailed discussion of de Witt's book on another page of my Web site at
<http://www.dlynnwaldron.com/deWittLumumba.html>

About the author

As an author, artist and photographer, D'Lynn Waldron journeyed through the remote areas of Asia and Africa. As a foreign correspondent, she was involved in the deadly intrigues of the Cold War. As a scholar, she went from sophomore to a multi-disciplinary PhD in a record-breaking 3 1/2 years. As a theoretician, she was one of the first to advocate the genetic biochemical basis for moods and emotions. As a scientist, she helped develop the computer technology used in publishing, the graphic arts, and the movies, and as a creative artist she does the artwork, animation and scores for TV specials. As a woman, she married the Prince of Nepal.

Above article and commentary by D'Lynn Waldron ©1960-2006 <http://www.dlwaldron.com/Lumumbamovie.html>

Political Film Society Film Review *Lumumba*

On June 30, 1960, King Baudouin I of Belgium granted independence to the Congo (Zaire from 1971), and Patrice Lumumba was named Prime Minister. Two months later Lumumba was out of power. Western news accounts identify Lumumba as a reckless pro-Soviet leader, but the truth has a way of coming out. Ten years in the making, director Raoul Peck has now brought new facts to light in the powerful biopic *Lumumba*. The film focuses on how Lumumba (played by Eriq Ebouaney) gave up a job in one of the provinces to sell beer in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), the capital of the Belgian Congo, while agitating for independence. For his efforts, colonial authorities imprison him, where he is brutalized until independence talks are convened in Brussels. Much of the story then focuses on the duplicity of Belgian authorities, who wanted to quit the country due to independence agitation but maintain control of the military force and the mineral-rich Katanga province. (There is even a subtext about polished if perfidious French-speaking Belgians, the Walloons, and the nasty Flemish.) Although Lumumba tries to form a unity government, with Joseph Kasavubu (played by Maka Kotto) as president, several provincial leaders refuse to go along, notably Katanga leader Moïse Tshombe (played by Pascal Nzonzi). In addition, the Belgian Force Publique, commanded and manned by Europeans, so overreact to lawlessness by anti-European troublemakers that law and order breaks down, whereupon Belgium wants to intervene and take control again. Accordingly, Prime Minister Lumumba replaces the Belgian commander with Mobutu. But the latter claims that he cannot stop human rights violations by his troops, further embarrassing Lumumba. Since more weapons are needed to stop the disorder, Lumumba toys with the idea of getting supplied by the Russians. The Americans then step in. According to the film, President Kennedy's envoy Frank Carlucci (played by Charles Thatcher) makes a deal with Mobutu (played by Alex Descas) to undermine Lumumba, and in January 1961 the latter is executed by a firing squad in a remote location, and Mobutu's star began to rise. Thus, Cold War-oriented Washington is implicated in Mobutu's brutal rule spanning about three decades. Stirring verbatim texts of Lumumba's speeches and his efforts to overcome Congolese disunity so pepper the film that Lumumba emerges as a posthumous hero. (The fact that the UN investigated Lumumba's death and then intervened in the Congo to put down the secession of Katanga and Kasai provinces comes after the time period of the film.) The opening of *Lumumba* in Beverly Hills on July 20 was preceded by screenings in Africa (but not Zaire so far) and Europe. In each case, according to Peck, audiences have received the film as a paradigm of how conflicts involving their countries were handled during the Cold War. Accordingly, the Political Film Society has nominated *Lumumba* for awards as best 2001 film on democracy, human rights, and peace as well as best political film exposé. MH
