

## A ‘What If’ Moment in Past U.S.-Eritrea Relations

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### Introduction

With the next U.S. elections on the horizon, Eritrean Americans across the United States are intensely debating ways to ensure their electoral voices will be heard in November and beyond on issues ranging from worries about recession to anxieties about foreign policy, especially U.S.-Eritrea relations.

However, unfortunately, Third World nations such as Eritrea normally do not figure in U.S. elections as much as they should though they are often greatly impacted by them. This sad reality of neglect is particularly true of African nations and this is generally more noticeable during U.S. presidential elections when foreign policy debates go on as if the continent does not exist—a resource-rich continent considered the most central of the major regions of the world with a fast-growing population of 1.4 billion and the birthplace of humanity.

But, in what was extremely rare, if not totally unprecedented, an African issue involving Eritrea and the other former Italian colonies—Libya and Somalia—was vigorously debated for about three months leading up to the election of 1948, offering a more hopeful alternative path in the decolonization of this former Italian and British colony. What triggered the heated debate, which was widely covered by the American, British and Italian press outlets, and described by some of the main dailies of the time as the first major source of clash between the two leading candidates, Democrat Harry S. Truman and Republican Thomas E. Dewey, was a proposal by the GOP candidate advocating for Italy’s return to its former African colonies under a UN trusteeship—a program that was established to guide former colonies toward independence after a ten-year preparatory transitional period. In fact, *The New York Times* reported that the proposal “aroused concern as to whether the country’s bipartisan foreign policy born in the [second World] war years might not fall in the heat of the presidential election campaign”<sup>1</sup> over Dewey’s proposal.

However, the chance of being placed in the trusteeship system created briefly for Eritrea a ‘what-if’ moment with soul-stirring possibilities of fundamentally changing the trajectory of the decolonization process of the Red Sea territory. The UN trusteeship system “was specifically designed to further self-government and decolonization [and] operated mainly on the principles of state-based administration,” argues Carsten Stahn, who traces the genesis of the system to the negotiations during World War II when “both the U.S. and the Soviet Union pushed for the dismemberment of the old European empires.”<sup>2</sup> It was a continuation of the UN Mandate System put in place after World War I but “the Trusteeship System corrected some of the failings of the [League of Nations’ mandate] system of administration and laid some foundations for the conceptualization of territorial administration under the umbrella of peace-maintenance.”<sup>3</sup> Explaining the original idea behind the trusteeship principle when it was adopted after World War I, then U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, said, “We have put the same safeguards around the poor naked fellows in the jungles of Africa that we have around those poor people almost ready to assume the full rights of self-government in some parts of the Turkish Empire.”<sup>4</sup> The ten-year transition was a preparatory period to ensure the residents of the trustee territories were ready for self-government.

To be sure, the principal objective of the proposal was Italy and how its ‘possessions’ abroad could help its war-ravaged economy, not the lofty ideals of freedom and self-determination for colonized Africans, though in his address Dewey said—almost as an afterthought—that the “*local population[s]*” would also benefit from his proposal. “If this is done, preferably under the flexible provisions of a United Nations trusteeship, I believe that the result will be mutually advantageous to the Italian people and *the local population*,”<sup>5</sup> he said. Furthermore, Novati argues, “even if almost all the Italian leaders who were working to build a democratic

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<sup>1</sup> Clayton Knowles, “Democrats Roiled by Dewey’s Proposal in Italian Colonies,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 1948, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Carsten Stahn, “The United Nations Trusteeship System,” in *The Law and Practice of International Territorial Administration: Versailles to Iraq and Beyond*, Christian Tomuschat. Cambridge University Press, pps. P.92-114, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Hamilton Foley, *Woodrow Wilson’s Case for the League of Nations*, New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1965, pages 46-7.

<sup>5</sup> *The New York Times*. “Dewey Calls for Italian Rule of Colonies Under the UN,” August 18, 1948, page 1. The original was a United Press article reported from the South Korean capital of Seoul. Please note, the published version also included parts of an Associated Press story. (Emphasis added)

post-Fascist state paid lip service to anti-colonial feelings, the government and the opposition alike were committed to rescue, if only in the guise of a trusteeship, at least part of the former African empire and to safeguard the privileges and properties of the *coloni* (settlers), *particularly in Eritrea*. Few if any at that time could have foreseen that the African continent would be so rapidly decolonized.”<sup>6</sup>

Of the three former Italian colonies, Eritrea would have been the principal beneficiary of the proposal because Libya and Italian Somaliland had not faced as much impediment as Eritrea in their quest for statehood. In fact, one year later, the UN decided to give Libya its independence and place Italian Somaliland in the trusteeship system under Italian administration for the ten-year transition before it was granted its independence in 1960. If the UN had given Eritrea the same opportunities--immediate independence or through the trusteeship system, the Red Sea territory would have avoided one of the major tragedies of the last century—a tragedy that started with the forced annexation of the territory by an expansionist neighbor with Washington’s blessing and all-round support whose destructive impact is still being felt today not only in Eritrea and Ethiopia but also in the rest of the Horn of Africa region.

Instead, the UN separated it from the group and decided to dispatch another commission of inquiry with a conflicting mission that was rigged to undermine the Eritrean people’s right to self-determination. The commission was instructed to determine the wishes of the Eritrean people and the needs of a neighboring country, Ethiopia, with regards to Eritrea--trying to reconcile two irreconcilable demands. The composition of the commission’s membership—Norway, Burma, South Africa, Pakistan and Guatemala--may also have been determined to ensure the final outcome would advance Ethiopia’s interests. For example, the inclusion of Apartheid South Africa, which was repeatedly condemned at that time by the United Nations for its racist system of government and for ignoring the world body’s decisions over Namibia, in itself put into question the mission of the commission. At that time, South Africa, like Ethiopia, was trying to secure superpower patronage in its frantic attempt to annex a neighboring former colony, Namibia. South Africa, like Ethiopia, also tried to leverage its participation in the U.S.-led crusade against communism in Korea. It is also important to note that before it joined the UN Commission, South Africa was decidedly against linking Eritrea to Ethiopia because of its implications for its apartheid policy as this would mean Italian settlers in Eritrea would be coming under black (Ethiopian) rule.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, included in the South African delegation was an economist brought to give the majority in the commission the cover they needed to try to legitimize their recolonization decision dressed up as a federation by declaring the territory economically not viable enough to be independent,<sup>8</sup> though it was called at that time Africa’s “most modern and go-ahead country outside Algeria, Egypt and the Union [of South Africa].”<sup>9</sup> The declaration by the South African economist was also in keeping with a false narrative the British had deployed as soon as they set foot as administrators in Eritrea to lay the groundwork for their partition agenda of the territory.

The obstruction to prevent the emergence of an independent Eritrea was coming from several directions, bringing together the Ethiopian emperor and his hired foreign lobbyists, his American and British superpower patrons and their global networks of supporters across the globe who used the then newly-born United Nations and its numerous agencies to legitimize their various designs on this Red Sea territory. But, for Eritrea, this trusteeship option *may* have provided an escape hatch from the multi-faceted schemes being hatched and implemented to block it from achieving statehood.

In theory, for Eritrea, as a former European colony, the option of being placed in the UN trusteeship system was available right from the start in 1945 when the U.S. pushed for a collective trusteeship for all three former Italian colonies to the last effort in the disposal process, five years later, when two of the five-nation UN commission on Eritrea--Guatemala and Pakistan—persistently advocated “for independence of Eritrea as a unit,

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<sup>6</sup> Giampaolo Calchi Novati, “Italy and Africa: how to forget colonialism,” in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 13(1), 2008, 41-57, page 44 (Emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Borstelmann, *Apartheid’s Reluctant Uncle*. Oxford University Press: New York, 1993, p. 128.

<sup>8</sup> G. K. N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea, A Colony in Transition: 1941-1952*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 100

<sup>9</sup> Sir Kennedy Trevaskis, *The Deluge: A Personal View of the End of Empire in the Middle East*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 2019, p. 52.1

following a ten-year period of trusteeship with the United Nations itself as the administering authority.”<sup>10</sup> In reality, however, given the sustained impediment it faced, the likelihood of achieving statehood outside the trusteeship system was low at best.

But, the new opportunity, which would have been coming with a White House endorsement and the strong support from the fairly large community of Americans of Italian descent that was highly mobilized to support their homeland and united in their grievance against a peace treaty Rome was forced to accept as one of the nations defeated in World War II, would likely have removed the obstructions. The terms of the 1947 Peace Treaty forced Rome to accept “a formal renunciation of all its colonies” and charged it with war damages,” leaving it “with no room for maneuvering.”<sup>11</sup>

Though Italy had very little chance on its own to return to its former African colonies as a trustee, it tried repeatedly to convince the victorious nations that it was ready and able to work under the UN trusteeship system. It tried just before the representatives of the powers entrusted with the disposition of the former Italian colonies sent a commission of inquiry to Eritrea to determine the wishes of the people at the end of 1947. In a memorandum submitted through the United States London Embassy, Rome tried to explain its stand on trusteeship for Eritrea. “The Italian [Government] believe that trusteeship within the formula and spirit of the Charter of the UN, would be the solution best designed to serve the interests of the Eritrean people,” it said. “The population of Eritrea is of such a complex composition from the ethnical, linguistic and religious point of view that it’s necessary to develop towards a modern political organization that cannot take place without the assistance and without encouraging, on a higher plane, the spirit of unity, which has been consolidated through 60 year of Italian administration.” Rome also expressed strong opposition to any attempt “to divide .....Eritrea into deferent units, besides being practically impossible.” Adding, it said, such a division “would also entail a severe blow to the economic development of the territory.” Italy declared its readiness “to promote at the earliest in Eritrea, in collaboration with the local populations, the formation of systems of self-government most suitable to the present degree of development of the country.”<sup>12</sup> It tried again two years later—but this time, it expressed willingness to share the administration of Eritrea with two of the four World War II victorious nations, Britain and France.<sup>13</sup> -In an announcement that was widely covered by the European press, Italy said, it “would consider a joint administration of Eritrea by Italy, France, and Great Britain, provided suitable guarantees were given to protect the interests settlers in this area.”-U.S. embassy officials said, though the report “has disturbed the Ethiopian government,” a plan “for the joint administration of Eritrea by the three countries named has considerable merit in the opinion of some observers here, although any such plan would no doubt be vigorously contested by Ethiopia in the United Nations General Assembly.”<sup>14</sup>

The literature shows that agreeing on the form of disposal, such as trusteeship, of the former colonies was one thing; however, finding common ground on the administering nation was something else. For example, the team of American foreign policy experts, which included the noted African American diplomat Ralph Bunche, drafted the first U.S. proposal that advocated trusteeship for all three former colonies “on the assumption that Italy would be the trustee, but the delegation *en route* [to the conference in London] decided in favor of direct United Nations administration.”<sup>15</sup>

### *The Proposal*

The Republican candidate and governor of New York launched his plan, initiated at the urging of prominent Italian Americans, their community leaders, their organizations as well as their media outlets, at a

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<sup>10</sup> John Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years*, Hollywood, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2006. p. 229; also see Okbazghi Yohannes, *Eritrea, A Pawn in World Politics*, Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1991, p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> Giampaolo Calchi Novati. “Italy and Africa: how to forget colonialism,” in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 13(1), 2008, 41-57, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. DOS, “Memorandum from the Italian Government,” December 18, 1947.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. DOS Document No. 865D.00/1-3149, “Rumored Plan for Joint Administration of Eritrea by France, Italy, and the United Kingdom.”

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Philip C. Jessup, *The Birth of Nations*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1971, p. 213.

press conference, where he announced that he “favored giving Italy administrative control of its former African colonies under a United Nations trusteeship.”<sup>16</sup> At the time, Italian Americans represented one of the significant voting blocs in the country. According to the 1950 U.S. census, America “was home to 1,427,145 Italian immigrants and 3,143,405 American-born people of Italian parentage. Third -generation Italian Americans accounted for about two million persons, comprising nearly five percent of the total American population of Italian descent.”<sup>17</sup> Most of what the Italian Americans did in the anticommunist crusade in the United States as well as in their homeland was not ideological. Luconi said. “Rather their effort stemmed from a pragmatic desire to advance Italian national interests in a reflection on Italian Americans’ retention of ethnic ties to Italy.”<sup>18</sup> The Democrats anticipated correctly that they were going to have trouble with “the Italian vote.” Most of the members of the community saw the Republican as being more sympathetic toward their homeland’s national interests than Truman. So, it was not surprising that most of them cast their ballots for him in November.<sup>19</sup>

The plan and the dispute it generated inside and outside the country immediately drew the attention of many major newspapers in the United States, the United Kingdom as well as Italy. Among the principal media outlets that consistently paid attention to it in the United States were the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* as well as the Associated Press (AP) and the United Press International (UPI), from the news agencies side of the media environment. From among the British print media that consistently carried the story was the *Manchester Guardian*.<sup>20</sup> Many of the papers seemed to support the Italian agenda. In a by-lined article trying to make “the case for Italian trusteeship” for Eritrea, a *Manchester Guardian* correspondent dismissed Ethiopia’s claim over the territory as unjustified. Reiterating the point, the paper said, “The need for an outlet to the sea cannot be admitted as the base for the claim to Eritrea.” Explaining why it was advocating for Italy’s return to the Red Sea territory, the paper, said, Italy’s “experience in this area is unrivalled; the modern towns of Massawa and Asmara, the railway and the road network are the work of her own hands; she devoted an enormous amount of study and research to all the problems of the territory.”<sup>21</sup>

Italian language newspapers and magazines in the United States such as *La Gazzetta dell Massachusetts* and *Il Progresso Italo Americano* also pushed for a return of Italy’s former African colonies and the revision of the peace treaty to allow Rome to regain its former ‘possessions’ abroad. In a letter to Truman from the publisher of *Il Progresso Italiano Americano* arguing that “the return of the pre-fascist colonies to Italy would strengthen ‘the Italian democratic government’ and effectively counter “the anti-democratic forces aiming to show the United States of America as less friendly to Italy than some other great country.”<sup>22</sup>

The response to Dewey’s proposal came from inside and outside the country. The media described the debate the proposal generated as the first clash between Dewey and Truman in the campaign. “President Truman and Gov. Thomas E. Dewey clashed for the first time in the 1948 campaign [and] the issue was Italy’s colonies in Africa,”<sup>23</sup> reported the *Washington Post*. Speaking at a White House press conference, Truman criticized his GOP counterpart “for advocating that the colonies be returned to Italy under a United Nations trusteeship.” Adding, he said, his Republican rival for the presidency was “playing politics with foreign policy

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<sup>16</sup> Clayton Knowles, “Democrats Roiled by Dewey’s Proposal in Italian Colonies: Making of Political Hay out of Bipartisan Foreign Policy is Laid to Governor,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 1948, p.1

<sup>17</sup>Stefano Luconi (1999), “Anticommunism, Americanization, and Ethnic Identity: Italian Americans and the 1948 Parliamentary Elections in Italy,” *The Historian*, 62:2, 285-302, DOI:10.1111/j.1540-6563.2000.tb01441.x, p. 285, quoting the U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of the Population: 1950, vol. 4/3 (Washington, D.C., 1954, 287.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. pps. 299-300.

<sup>20</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, “Rival Claims to Eritrea: Making the Case for Italian Trusteeship,” From a Correspondent, November 24, 1947, p. 4

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Luconi, “Anticommunism,” p. 297.

<sup>23</sup> Edward T. Folliard, “Truman Hits Dewey Stand on Italian Colonies,” *Washington Post*, August 4, 1948, p. 1.

and angling for the Italian-American vote,”<sup>24</sup> said *The Washington Post*. “It was the first time since he [Truman] and Dewey were nominated at Philadelphia by their respective parties that Mr. Truman had said anything critical of his GOP adversary.”<sup>25</sup>

Speaking for the Democratic Party, Alben W. Barkley, Truman’s running mate, also accused the GOP candidate of damaging U.S. diplomacy. “At a time when negotiations were under way with Russia and other nations over the disposition of the former Italian colonies, Governor Dewey announced from Albany that he was for the restitution of these colonies to Italy,” he said. However, the AP report added that “neither President Truman nor himself, Barkley, was willing to attribute the Republican candidate’s announcement to “partisan political purposes to attempt to interfere in the delicate international negotiations” that were underway at the time of announcement.”<sup>26</sup>

In a quick response to the charges of harming U.S. diplomacy, Dewey said he felt a “solemn obligation” to lay his views on world affairs before the American people and do it “fully and frankly.”<sup>27</sup> Several campaign officials on both sides of the dispute also responded through the rest of the campaign season pushing different narratives of their respective parties. Among the prominent Democrats who expressed support for the Republican Dewey on the issue of Italian colonies was the Democratic mayor of New York City, home to a high concentration of Italian Americans, who said, in a letter to the publisher of an Italian language daily, *Il Progresso*, “As a result of wartime experience with the economic problems of the Italian people, it is my firm belief that the colonies of Somaliland, Eritrea, and Libya, now under British occupation, should be returned to Italian control under a UN trusteeship.” Adding, he said, Italy “has suffered the plunder of fascism and the ruin of war. It must attain a sound recovery. In order to complete that recovery, Italy should be free to develop a sound commerce with these territories.”<sup>28</sup>

Another response from outside the country came from Ethiopia whose representative in Washington, D.C. expressed ‘profound resentment’ “at the suggestion of Gov. Thomas E. Dewey that Italy should receive administration control, under a United Nations trusteeship, of her former Italian colonies.” Trying to explain his country’s position on the controversy further, the Ethiopian envoy said, it was ‘regrettable’ in that ‘justice and the general interest of durable peace is compromised for a short-term political expediency.’<sup>29</sup>

In his first major public show of his commitment to the plan, Dewey sent a delegation led by the only Italian American on his cabinet, Edward Corsi, to Rome to address this and other economic rehabilitation ideas with the Italian government. In Rome, Corsi held a two-hour press conference where he was grilled by the local and foreign press on several issues trying to find out if American attitude toward Italy had changed since the end of World War II when Fascist Italy allied with the Axis powers, a military alliance whose other members were Germany and Japan. *The New York Times*, in its report from Rome, said, “The huge interest among Italians in whether the election of Gov. Thomas E. Dewey as president would change the American attitude toward Italy.” The paper’s Rome correspondent wrote Corsi, who was introduced to the media in a pre-event press release as ‘the Italian-American who [was] closest to Dewey,’ was asked whether Dewey “would help Italy get full control of her former African colonies.”<sup>30</sup>

In his response to Dewey’s offer, the then Italian premier, Alcide De Gasperi, assured Gov. Dewey that his country had “no designs on Africa” and that it was “not looking for adventures in Africa but for work and civil cooperation with an *autonomously organized African populations*.” Another major American daily, *the Washington Post*, also had sustained coverage from Rome of what it described as Dewey’s “advocacy of Italian supervision of Eritrea, Libya and Italian Somaliland under a United Nations trusteeship.”<sup>31</sup> The offer was one

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Associated Press (AP), “Barkley Hits Dewey for Colonies Stand,” September 28, 1948; was published in *The Washington Post*, September 29, 1948, p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Folliard, *Truman Hits Dewey*, p.1

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, page 2.

<sup>29</sup> “Ethiopia ‘Resents’ Dewey Suggestion: Legation Hits Plea to Return African Colonies to Italy as ‘Political Expediency,’” *The New York Times*, August 20, 1948, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> *The New York Times*, “Italians Show Interest in Dewey Plan,” August 24, 1948, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

part of a broader Dewey plan to help Rome rehabilitate its war-shattered economy. Dewey believed one way of helping it was by providing Italy access to resource in its former colonies. “Under the European recovery plan we are making a great effort to strengthen the economies of the countries of Western Europe, of which one of the most important is Italy,” the GOP presidential candidate said. “The Italian people have welcomed this help, but I am sure that they desire, most of all, a real opportunity to get on their feet again by their own efforts, and we should do whatever we properly can to provide them with that opportunity.”<sup>32</sup> He expressed his belief that “the industrious people of Italy...will be assisted, and the communist menace will receive another setback, if the Italian people are now given an ample opportunity *to take part in the future development of the resources of these African areas.*”<sup>33</sup>

Italian American leaders and their organizations saw a clear link between America’s focus on the spread of communism in their homeland and Italy’s multi-faceted effort to return to its former African colonies and tried to utilize the former as a lever to achieve the latter. In other words, they tried to use Washington’s anti-communist crusade to support their efforts to help Italy’s postwar recovery plan. Luconi argues that “Italian Americans participated very little in anticommunist campaigns that didn’t involve Italy’s interest”<sup>34</sup> and that “the coming of the Cold War offered Italian Americans better opportunities to lobby for Italy on that basis.”<sup>35</sup> For example, when Washington urged the Italian American community to engage actively in its effort to prevent the communists from taking over in the 1948 Italian parliamentary elections, they saw that the elections “represented a favorable condition to pursue ‘a fair revision of the [peace] treaty [and] the admission of Italy into the U.N.’”<sup>36</sup>

### *Shifting U.S. Policy*

The extent of the multi-layered obstruction at work to prevent the emergence of an independent Eritrea was at that time extremely rare, if not unprecedented, in the post-World War II decolonization process. Each member of the obstructionist forces had its own design on the Red Sea territory located in one of the most geographically important parts of the globe.

At the center of this political and diplomatic dilemma was the United States which was frantically building a new order for the post-1945 world, sometimes trampling over small nations such as Eritrea in the process. It emerged from World War II donning the mantle of global leadership with the image and reputation of an anti-colonialist. So, it was not surprising when the victorious powers—the United Kingdom, the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, France as well as the United States—sat down in 1945 to dispose the former Italian colonies, that it was the U.S. that put forth a plan for collective trusteeship under UN supervision—very similar to that of Dewey’s plan three years later. Explaining the reason behind the U.S. stance on the issue, the then Secretary of State, James F. Byrnes, said that his country’s main interest in proposing this plan was the belief ‘that a trusteeship should be established solely to assist the inhabitants of the colonies to develop the capacity for self-government so that the people might be granted independence [land] give[n] assurance that the Italian colonies will not be developed....*for the military advantage of anyone.*’”<sup>37</sup>

In their first encounter with Eritrea in the early 1940s when Washington deployed a top secret project that included a naval repair facility in Massawa and an air base in Gura, in the southern part of the territory managed by the Douglas Aircraft Corporation to help the beleaguered British military in the war against the Axis powers in Africa, the Americans liked what they saw in the Red Sea territory with a growing economy and relatively expanding modern institutions. In fact, they wanted to showcase Eritrea as an “arsenal of democracy” in Africa as part of their global effort to deploy non-military resources in the war against Fascism and Nazism. “The ultimate aim of the American effort in Eritrea, taken from the General Directive of the President of the United States, the Secretary of War and the War Department through the North African Mission in Cairo and

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<sup>32</sup> Leo Egan, “Dewey Calls for Italian Rule of Colonies Under the UN,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 1948, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pps. 1-2. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>34</sup> Luconi, “Anticommunism..,” p. 298.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, pps. 301-302

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 302.

<sup>37</sup> Okbazghi, Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1991, p. 79. (Emphasis added)

thence through the Army Corps Officers down to our own working organization, was to make Eritrea the ‘American Arsenal of Democracy’ in Africa,”<sup>38</sup> wrote the U. S. War Department contractor Johnson, Drake and Piper, Inc., which built the air base.

However, the American position on Eritrea slowly began to shift away from its original stance and took a turn for the worse three years later when the Truman administration came out with different damaging interventionist ideas indicating a deteriorating shift. Philip Jessup, trying to reveal what was going on behind the scenes at that time, said, “During the summer of 1948, United States policies on the disposition of the Italian colonies were being actively studied.”<sup>39</sup> Adding, he said, “different proposals were flying around for the different territories.... *but not on Eritrea.*”<sup>40</sup> However, the literature indicates that U.S. foreign policy makers were also actively working on the Eritrean case. Although the Truman administration’s opposition to Dewey’s UN trusteeship plan for Italy’s former colonies was that it would disrupt and undermine the negotiations that were underway among the representatives of the victorious nations, Washington was actually trying out different approaches on Eritrea. Lefebvre says some of the key units of the U.S. foreign policy establishment such as the National Security Council and the Department of State as well as the Department of Defense were trying out different narratives to justify Washington’s evolving decision to link Eritrea to its client state Ethiopia. For example, the National Security Council’s proposed justification was that Eritrea would not be strong enough to withstand communist pressures. The Department of State’s opposition to placing Eritrea in the trusteeship system under Italian administration was on the ground that the then Italian government might fall to the communists who were competing in the country’s 1948 parliamentary elections. As a result, “the State Department concluded in early August 1948 that all of Eritrea should be given to Ethiopia.” The U.S. Department of Defense “also favored Ethiopian control over Eritrea.”<sup>41</sup> Washington also found later another narrative in the Korean War to try to justify its unsupportable stance on the Eritrean people’s right to control their own destiny. “In what was justified publicly as compensation for Ethiopia’s offer to contribute troops to the UN police action in Korea, the United States began [in 1950] advocating federation between Ethiopia and all of Eritrea.”<sup>42</sup> The timing of these two parallel developments as they relate to the Eritrean question—Dewey’s proposal for a collective trusteeship and the Truman administration’s frantic behind-the-scenes search for a narrative to cover up its decision to hand over the Red Sea territory to the Ethiopian emperor—may not have been coincidental; however, there is nothing in the readily available literature to show if one prompted the other.

The other members of the victorious nations that were determined to deny the Eritrean people their right to self-determination were Great Britain and France. Britain, which was mandated by the victorious nations to temporarily administer the territory as a caretaker, saw its occupation as a land-grab opportunity and, as a result, it tried to partition the territory—with more than half of the territory joining their Sudan Dominion to the west, and the rest going to their client state Ethiopia to the south. “At its core, [Britain’s] partition plan was an expression of entitlement for a share of the spoils of war.”<sup>43</sup> So, it was not surprising that Britain was consistently opposed to any idea that was likely to lead to Eritrean statehood. France did not want to see any former or existing colony achieve independence because of the implications of such measure for its own colonies. Though it was willing to see Italy return to Eritrea and its other former colonies, it did not want it to come back under the UN trusteeship system, which prepares the trustee territories for independence after a ten-year period. The last member of the group, the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR), changed its mind on the case several times and its position ranged from shared trusteeship administration by all the members of the victorious nations to independence for the former colony.

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<sup>38</sup> Johnson, Drake and Piper, Inc., *Middle East War Projects for the Corps of Engineering*, U.S. Army, 1942-1943, No. Day-W-1098-ENG. 198, New York, p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> Jessup, *The Birth of Nations*, p. 215.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 217. (Emphasis added).

<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, *Arms for the Horn: U.S. Security Policy in Ethiopia and Somalia 1953-1991*, p. 66

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 67.

<sup>43</sup> Asgede Hagos, “When Eritreans Faced a Double Annexation,” retrieved from

[https://www.academia.edu/45430435/Book\\_Review\\_When\\_Eritreans\\_Faced\\_a\\_Double\\_Annexation](https://www.academia.edu/45430435/Book_Review_When_Eritreans_Faced_a_Double_Annexation), on September 30, 2022.

To fully understand how the force of obstruction abused the decolonization of this former colony, turned it into a recolonization effort and tried to make it look like a federation between two nations, one has to consider the role of the then newly established U.S.-dominated United Nations which provided the forum as well as its power to legitimize decisions between and among member nations. The post-World War II era began with promises of decolonization and freedom and the vehicle to achieving these goals was the United Nations. As a result, former colonies—small and large—looked to this new world body for justice. However, a cursory look at how it handled the decolonization of Eritrea shows that this case was one of the organizations notable failures. It failed to ensure the Eritrean people a level-playing field in the decolonization process. For example, as stated above, in its last major act in that process, the UN sent a commission of inquiry with a rigged membership and a conflicting mission that required the determination of the wishes of the Eritrean people *as well as* the needs of a neighboring nation that was trying to annex it. The Eritrean decolonization case also exposed how the powerful nations abuse the world body to serve their interests as well as those of their client states. Even the man who served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations when the disposal of the former Italian colonies was debated and decided, Philip C. Jessup, said, though “the part played by the [United Nations] in the births of Libya and Somalia was direct and conclusive...the disposition of Eritrea can be described here only as a stillbirth.”<sup>44</sup> As a final resolution of the case, it allowed the recolonization of the territory under the cover of a sham federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Even the noted Ethiophile, Haggai Erlich, who has written extensively to delegitimize the Eritrean people’s right to self-determination and dismiss their cause as an attempt to turn the Red Sea into an Arab Lake, admits that “the federation was fictitious almost from the start.”<sup>45</sup>

### *A Stunning Upset*

One of the most amazing aspects about the 1948 U.S. presidential election was that almost every prediction had shown that Dewey would win. The leading national daily, *The New York Times*, described the expected Dewey win as “virtually certain.”<sup>46</sup> Polls had the Republican candidate up by a wide margin all the way to Election Day. The odds favoring Thomas Dewey in the polls were persistently high. In fact, one poll taker with three months to Election Day, said, “Dewey is almost as good as elected to the presidency [so] I can think of nothing duller or more intellectually barren’ than to treat the remaining eight weeks of the campaign as some sort of horse race.”<sup>47</sup>

Even the major dailies such as *The New York Times* that had traditionally endorsed only Democrats, this time endorsed Dewey.” Furthermore, “even Truman himself seemed resigned to defeat.”<sup>48</sup> So did some of his administration officials. When the UN General Assembly met in Paris in early 1948, where it took responsibility of the disposal of former Italian colonies, U.S. ambassador to the UN Phillip Jessup, wrote “as in the United States, so in Paris, it was generally assumed during the autumn of 1948 that Thomas Dewey would defeat President Truman and would at once announce that John Foster Dulles would be his Secretary of State. General Carlos Romulo of the Philippines even staged a dinner in Paris on election night in Dulles’ honor; the guest of honor carried off with aplomb what might have been an embarrassment to his host.”<sup>49</sup>

In fact, some of the news outlets were so sure of the outcome that the editors of one major paper, the *Chicago Tribune*, went to bed convinced that their first headline on election night pronouncing that Dewey had won would not need any revision. It is this memorable headline we occasionally see used today as a cautionary tale to remind politicians and pollsters alike about the consequences of overconfidence in electoral forecasts. A full account of the unexpected election outcome is beyond the scope of this paper. But, the literature attributes

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<sup>44</sup> Jessup, *The Birth of Nations*, p, 211.

<sup>45</sup> Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea, 1962-1978: War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1983, p 6

<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey Frank, *The Trials of Harry S. Truman: The Extraordinary Presidency of an Ordinary Man, 1945-1953*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022), p. 183.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Scott Farris, *Almost President: The Men Who Lost the Race but Changed the Nation*, Guilford, Connecticut: Lyons Press, 2012, p. 140

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 219.

it to an air of overconfidence that led “a full 13 percent of those who had identified themselves as Dewey supporters before the election simply did not bother to vote.”<sup>50</sup> In an article in *Journal of Psychohistory* that tried to determine how Donald Trump pulled off in 2016 one of the two biggest upsets in U.S. presidential election history or how Hillary Clinton lost when she should have easily won, Fuchsman put it this way: “[Hillary Clinton] was to Trump what Dewey was to [Harry] Truman.” He characterized the equally stunning upset of Hillary Clinton a few years ago as “the return of the Ghost of Thomas Dewey in 1948.”<sup>51</sup>

With Dewey’s stunning defeat was lost a possible golden opportunity for Eritrea to escape the almost overwhelming obstacles placed on its path to exercise its right to self-determination and avoid decades of unspeakable human suffering.

### **A ‘What-If’ Moment**

But, what if the election forecasters were right? What if some or all of the 13% of Dewey’s loyal supporters didn’t decide to stay home thinking their candidate was sure to defeat the ‘unpopular’ Truman without their votes? If the GOP presidential candidate had won, the plan, with a push from the White House and the strong support of the highly engaged Italian American community, would have given Eritrea a reasonable path to achieve statehood, and avoid one of the major tragedies of the last century. Such a move would also have triggered a slew of events that could have fundamentally changed the trajectory of post-World War II histories of Eritrea, Ethiopia as well as the rest of the Horn of Africa region. It would also have significantly reduced the horrendous human suffering and the profound social disruptions it caused not only in Eritrea, but also in the rest of the region.

As a result, Eritrea would have joined the seven African trust territories “under the administration of the U.N. Trusteeship Council: Tanganyika, Rwanda-Urundi [Burundi], British Cameroons, French Cameroons, British Togoland, French Togoland, and Italian Somaliland; the rest of the trustee territories were: Western Samoa, New Guinea, Nauru, and the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

This would also have amounted to an across-the-board dismissal of Ethiopia’s unjustified claims over the Red Sea territory and, in turn, it would have impelled the Ethiopian emperor to take another close look at all the other options for sea access his country had outside of Eritrea—as he had done three years earlier when Washington pushed for collective trusteeship for all the three former colonies. At that time, the emperor was forced to initiate “negotiations with Britain on the possible acquisition of the port of Zeila, in British Somaliland, to serve Ethiopia as connecting sea corridor in return for the Ogaden, which Britain had been seeking from Ethiopia in order to realize its dream of creating ‘greater Somalia.’”<sup>52</sup> He then dispatched to London in early 1946 his top diplomats “to lay formally the Ethiopian basis for a quid pro quo arrangement” which he soon found out that “Britain showed little enthusiasm for the Ethiopian project, not so much because she didn’t like the idea, but because she thought that it might jeopardize her plan of partitioning Eritrea, with half of it going to Ethiopia in return for the Ogaden.”<sup>53</sup>

At the end of the ten-year trusteeship transitional period, Eritrea would have gained its full sovereignty and joined Somalia and the other 16 former African colonies that became independent in 1960, known as ‘The Year of Africa’: Nigeria, Senegal, Mauritania, Gabon, Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Chad, Cote d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Mali, Togo, and Cameroons. The trusteeship system was further reinforced during the second decade of the decolonization era by new UN actions as well as the emergence of many independent nations that attempted to accelerate the decolonization process in the continent. Nanes argues that “the concept of self-determination was given

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, pps. 142-143.

<sup>51</sup> Ken Fuchsman, “The Return of the Ghost of Thomas Dewey in 1948: Hillary Clinton and the 2016 Election,” in *The Journal of Psychohistory*, New York, Vol 45, 1 Iss. 1 Summer 2017, pages 33-40), p. 38.

<sup>52</sup> Yohannes, *Eritrea, A Pawn in World Politics*, p. 80

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p 81.

additional stature in UN Resolution 1514 (XV), adopted by the General Assembly in 1960.”<sup>54</sup> Tesfagiorgis, explaining how it enhanced the concept, says, “Its propositions represent a significant step towards operationalizing the right to self-determination in accordance with the provisions of the United Nations Charter.” And he added this: “There is generally a consensus that the intent of Res 1514 (XV) was to make the principle of self-determination universally applicable.”<sup>55</sup> The resolution reiterated that “all peoples had the right of self-determination, that repressive measures of all kinds directed against dependent peoples were to cease, and that immediate steps were to be taken to transfer all powers to the peoples of those territories, without any conditions or reservations, in accordance with their freely expressed will and desire.”<sup>56</sup> This would probably have boosted Eritrea’s chances of escaping the consequences of 30 years of war and join the newly independent African nations instead.

Such a scenario of history would also have mitigated the turmoil the Horn of Africa endured as a direct result of the brutal 30-year Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict whose adverse effects are still being felt throughout the region today. As a result, such an opportunity for Eritrea would also have set the rest of the region on a more hopeful path into its future.

### ***Conclusion***

In closing, “It’s hard to imagine alternative paths of history when the actual path is already known,” said Morgan Housel. “So, things always look more inevitable than they were.” However, he added, “history is only interesting because nothing is inevitable.”<sup>57</sup>

There was nothing inevitable about what happened in Eritrea during the post-World War II period. The recolonization of this former colony, veiled as a federation with its neighbor Ethiopia, is the outcome of a successive set of deliberate choices and acts by those who wanted to build the Cold War world in their own image to advance their own interests as well as those of their client states, such as Ethiopia.

The ‘What-If’ moment in past U.S.-Eritrean relations described in this paper was an event that was brief in its duration and limited to one presidential election, and there were many unknowns that could have diverted or even aborted it even if Dewey had won. Yet, this brief campaign window could have opened up a *hopeful alternative path of history* for this highly victimized former colony and for the rest of the region.

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**Asgede Hagos, Ph.D.**, author of *Hardened Images: The Western Media and the Marginalization of Africa*.

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<sup>54</sup> Allan S. Nanes, “The U.S. Position on Recognizing Forced Annexation of Territory,” Congressional Research Service. Report, Library of Congress, June 1, 1977. p. 44

<sup>55</sup> Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis, “Eritrea: A Case of Self-determination,” Working Paper No. 1, January 1990. Eritreans for Peace and Democracy, p. 9. Also see “an expanded version of this paper ...first published in the Wisconsin International Law Journal, Vol. 6, No. 1, Fall 1987, under the title “Self-Determination: Its Evolution and Practice by the United Nations and its Application to the Case of Eritrea.”

<sup>56</sup> Nanes, “The U.S. Position on Recognizing Forced Annexation of Territory,” p. 44.

<sup>57</sup> Morgan Housel, “History is Only Interesting Because Nothing is Inevitable,” February 2020, retrieved September 16, 2022; at <https://collabfund.com/blog/history-is-only-interesting-because-nothing-is-inevitable/>



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