



# White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations (The United States in the World)

By Robert Vitalis

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**White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations (The United States in the World)** By Robert Vitalis

Racism and imperialism are the twin forces that propelled the course of the United States in the world in the early twentieth century and in turn affected the way that diplomatic history and international relations were taught and understood in the American academy. Evolutionary theory, social Darwinism, and racial anthropology had been dominant doctrines in international relations from its beginnings; racist attitudes informed research priorities and were embedded in newly formed professional organizations. In *White World Order, Black Power Politics*, Robert Vitalis recovers the arguments, texts, and institution building of an extraordinary group of professors at Howard University, including Alain Locke, Ralph Bunche, Rayford Logan, Eric Williams, and Merze Tate, who was the first black female professor of political science in the country.

Within the rigidly segregated profession, the "Howard School of International Relations" represented the most important center of opposition to racism and the focal point for theorizing feasible alternatives to dependency and domination for Africans and African Americans through the early 1960s. Vitalis pairs the contributions of white and black scholars to reconstitute forgotten historical dialogues and show the critical role played by race in the formation of international relations.

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## **White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations (The United States in the World) By Robert Vitalis Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #441196 in Books
- Published on: 2015-11-17
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.30" h x 1.20" w x 6.40" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 288 pages

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## Editorial Review

### Review

"Defying his discipline's preference for theory over history, Vitalis has demonstrated how detailed, archive-based historical accounts can lift the veil on the racism running through international relations as field and practice."<sup>7</sup>Carol Polsgrove,*American Historical Review*

"Robert Vitalis wants his discipline to understand not only how central the category of race and the structures of racism were to its founding institutions and paradigms but also to see the erasure of that history not as progress but as repression, a willful forgetting that has if anything made it less equipped to comprehend (much less to address) the shocking racial inequities that still mark both the American and the global order. If international relations scholars want to understand the racial politics that made their field what it is today, there is no better place to begin than with this righteously angry book."<sup>8</sup>Susan Pederson, *London Review of Books*, October 20, 2016

"*White World Order, Black Power Politics* is a groundbreaking book that has the potential to transform our understanding of a key dimension of twentieth-century American social science. It also contains important, albeit uncomfortable, lessons for contemporary scholars of international politics. Drawing on a vast range of primary sources, Robert Vitalis demonstrates that from the origins of the field until deep into the Cold War, IR helped to serve the interests of the imperial powers and provided an intellectual rationale for the claims of global white supremacy. But this didn't go unchallenged, and he performs an equally important service by drawing attention to the 'Howard School' of IR, a group of remarkable African American scholars who provided the only sustained source of resistance to the racial and imperial pretensions of the field."<sup>9</sup>Duncan Bell, University of Cambridge, author of *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900*

"*White World Order, Black Power Politics* possesses great intellectual weight and no small amount of ethical urgency. It is an ambitious, insightful, and provocative examination of the history of the discipline of international relations from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s. Vitalis demonstrates that in many ways the *raison d'être* of IR was to address the 'race problem' and its implications for global affairs at various historical moments. As Vitalis makes clear, American investment in the idea and practice of empire was buttressed by the work of white scholars who became the architects of the discipline of IR as it is known today. The second major thread of *White World Order, Black Power Politics* is the presence and dogged commitment of African American scholars to advance counterarguments about the meaning of race, the legitimacy of empire, and the implications of freedom for oppressed people of color."<sup>10</sup>Chad Williams, Brandeis University, author of *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era*

"The study of international relations was not born to promote peace among equal states but rather to help ensure racial subjugation on a global scale. This is the startling, bold, and persuasive argument of Robert Vitalis's *White World Order, Black Power Politics*. This is a book that anyone interested in race relations, international relations, and empire will need to read, and they will all thank Vitalis for daring to write it."?Julian Go, author of *Patterns of Empire*

"A revelation, a provocation, and an inspiration, *White World Order, Black Power Politics* is required reading for everyone who studies, teaches, or practices international relations in the United States. In reconstructing a lost history of the impact of race and racism in the American study and practice of international relations, Robert Vitalis exposes congenital deformations in the field all the more grave for being invisible and ensures that we will never look at what we do the same way again."?Lisa Anderson, author of *Pursuing Truth, Exercising Power*

"This landmark book provides a superbly well-researched history of the racist underpinnings and practices of International Relations as it first emerged in the United States, and across the Atlantic. Its core analyses – sustained through a detailed recounting of the arguments and politics of individual scholars, philanthropists, and the then nascent funding institutions and think tanks - challenge and serve to demystify the mythology of IR as a field of interstate relations. The discipline was established first and foremost to analyze interracial relations and the sustenance of white supremacy. *White World Order, Black Power Politics* shows how IR, like many social and historical sciences, responded to the imagined imperatives of racial and colonial management. Moreover, the book excavates the hidden history of American IR by bringing to light the contributions to the study of world politics of a group of extraordinary African American scholars, who collectively Vitalis calls the 'Howard School of international relations theory': Alain Locke, Ralph Bunche, E. Franklin Frazier, Rayford Logan, Merze Tate, and Eric Williams, alongside W. E. B. Du Bois, worked to resist these racist premises and imperial imperatives between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century. Their struggles reveal not only IR's white supremacist origins, but also why this past may not have yet been surpassed. An intellectual and historical tour de force."?Award Citation, Sussex International Theory Prize

## About the Author

Robert Vitalis is Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* and *When Capitalists Collide: Business Conflict and the End of Empire in Egypt* and coeditor of *Counter-Narratives: History, Society and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*.

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