Interview with Dr. Benjamin Talton

Casey VanSise: Hello, everyone. This is Casey VanSise. I am the current Thomas J. Davis Fellow at the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy (CENFAD) for the 2021-22 academic year, for those who do not know me yet. This video is being recorded on November 12, 2021. We are speaking today with Dr. Benjamin Talton, Professor of History at Temple University. To give a little overview of his background, Dr. Talton earned his doctorate at the University of Chicago, and also a Bachelor of Arts at Howard University. Before joining Temple's faculty, he was a Visiting Senior Lecturer and Scholar-in-Residence at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana, and an Assistant Professor of History at Hofstra University. He is the author of three books, including *In This Land of Plenty: Mickey Leland and Africa in American Politics*, published by Penn Press in 2019, University of Pennsylvania Press, and that [book] won the 2020 Wesley-Logan Prize and is the subject of our conversation today. So welcome, Dr. Talton.

Dr. Benjamin Talton: Thank you, Casey!

CV: Perfect. So I was wondering, I guess, firstly—I just kind of wanted to give our audience a bit of an overview about your book in general. So, sort of like the subject matter and what your main overall thesis is, and then in particular, just kind of introduce the figure of Mickey Leland to our audience and how he matters to your book, if that makes sense.

BT: Well, let me start by asking, how much time do I have? Because I could go on for about three hours introducing that part—

CV: I am aiming for about an hour. We can go a little over that if necessary.

BT: No. That is fine. So the book is about a congressman from Houston, Texas, Mickey Leland, but it is not just about him. I situate him as a way of telling a broader story about the afterlife or the jetstreams of "Black Power" and the Civil Rights movement as we move into the 1980s, and what some of these figures were doing. Some activists moved into organizing schools, some opened clinics, some became teachers, some people—Mickey Leland became a member of Congress. And what is significant about Mickey Leland is that he did not just move away from the movement. He brought that movement with him into Congress, first in the Texas state legislature in 1972, and he was there until '78, and then as a member of Congress from 1980 until 1989. And so part of the story that I am telling is what happens to some of these activists after the movement, and for him, he brings the

movement into Congress and also some of the issues that he was concerned with. But I also use him to tell the story of the last decade of the Cold War. I use him to talk about the anti-apartheid movement in the United States, and I also use him to talk about humanitarianism. Because these are all issues that he was involved in, and more. But also, he was one of the most outspoken members of Congress on issues of African affairs, and Caribbean affairs as well. This was a point in our history when Africa was very much in the news, in large part because of the anti-apartheid movement, but also because we have figures from the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement, very much internationally—very much invested in international issues: Vietnam, what is going on in Cuba, but also what is going on in Africa. And he brings us—that positionality, with him into Congress, continuing to raise issues like that. So he was a significant figure because he was—he did not stand alone, but he was unique in the ways that he approached this, [and] also because in this moment when apartheid dominates the ways in which we are engaging Africa—the United States during the 1980s—he does not want to just rest and say "we are dealing with apartheid in South Africa, and the ties that the US has to the apartheid—the white minority regime, the apartheid regime in South Africa." He also wanted to deal with issues of hunger. This is a decade that saw historic famines in the Sahel region of Africa, and also the Horn – Ethiopia and Somalia, what is now [South] Sudan. And so he had a very broad take on African affairs that really was instrumental in elevating African affairs within Congress. But also on the point of the Cold War, and dealing with hunger, and dealing with apartheid—one initiative that tied all these together for Mickey Leland – again, coming out of the Black Power movement and the Civil Rights movement – he was very much against this idea of dealing with international affairs through a Cold War lens. The Cold War is the way that the US was engaging the world in general, and specifically Africa. Anti-communism was the platform that the United States government [used to deal] with most African countries – whether they were anti-communist or not, the United States put them in a category of being either aligned with communism or not, [which] really drew along the lines of whether these countries were allied with US interests. And if they were not, they were seen as more tied to Eastern Bloc nations or to Cuba, or Marxists in some way. So Mickey Leland and some of his colleagues rejected this idea of anti-communism. They did not see communism as a threat. Some of them may have—some of them were Marxists, Mickey Leland was not. But communism was not an existential threat to the United States. Communism was not something that was really prevalent in terms of African regimes on the continent. And so, therefore, to deal with the continent through a Cold War lens, through anti-communism, was deleterious for US standing in the world, and also destructive to African nations. So he very much wanted to push the United States to engage countries that were left-leaning—well, let me rephrase that. At independence, there were no countries that were communist or Marxist, but by the time we get to the 1980s, obviously there were communist countries – Ethiopia being one of them, Angola being another one, Mozambique. And so Mickey Leland wanted the United States to engage with these countries, to say that political ideology should not matter – we should just respond to the needs, help them develop—in the case of Ethiopia, help them resolve this issue. And so Ethiopia is going to be our case-study – we have got to address this historic famine in Ethiopia. There was one in 1983, one in 1985, another one in 1987,

1989. And his idea was that Ethiopia is a Marxist country facing a food crisis. The United States has no diplomatic ties with it. Ronald Reagan is president. Ronald Reagan is really the most extreme in his use of anti-communism as foreign policy, [and] he has very little interest in Africa. And on the point of apartheid, [Reagan] is actually on the side of the white minority regime. One of the sayings about Reagan when he enters office in January 1981: "the only thing he knows about Africa is that he is on the side of the whites, right?" And so Mickey Leland and his colleagues helped put US foreign policy toward South Africa against apartheid, bringing a civil rights, Black Power position – really a Third World political position – into Congress, into the White House, and things shifted. So then the United States imposes these sanctions on South Africa. Reagan vetoes this, but they overturn the veto – this is the first time in history that—the first time in the period of the Cold War that the president had his veto overturned on foreign policy. But in Ethiopia, Mickey Leland really wants the United States to respond to this famine despite this Marxist regime to demonstrate that the United States can work with communist countries, and also that the United States, putting ideology aside, can resolve the problem of hunger. So finally, one thing I state distinguishes Mickey Leland is his death. He led seven delegations to Ethiopia. On the seventh, his plane entered cloud cover and crashed into a mountain, and he and his fourteen-member delegation died in that crash. And so he served in Congress from '80 to '89, and was this charismatic, dynamic figure who really helped shift the United States's approach to African affairs.

CV: Well, very good. Thank you so much for that very thorough yet contained summary! I really appreciated it. I think you did well with that—

BT: – Okay. Good. –

CV: —of describing your book, giving a general overview to our audience. And so I do definitely want to get into the sort of intellectual and policy diversity that emerged from this sort of outgrowth of the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement, as you say, and how that related to a lot of the transnational themes you are exploring. And I think—I guess a good way to get into that just from—initially, before we get into other questions—your book is part of the "Politics and Culture in Modern America" series. And to quote the editors of that series, from the statement that appears toward the beginning of your book, the series seeks to "analyze political and social change in the broadest dimensions from 1865 to the present, including ideas about the ways people have sought and wielded power in the public sphere and the language and institutions of politics at all levels—local, national, and transnational […] motivated by a desire to reverse the fragmentation of modern U.S. history and to encourage synthetic perspectives on social movements and the state, on gender, race, and labor, and on intellectual history and popular culture." And you were alluding to quite a bit of this in your overall summary of the book – basically how you are trying to sort of cross these different historical boundaries that previously were kind of confined and segregated among historians—that these sort of transnational, local, and national perspectives were not dealt with as synthetically or as systematically. Just in general, there was not this crossover between always examining, perhaps, African-American politics and what was going on in Africa, and relating that to Cold War themes as well. So I guess I was

wondering, could you describe some of the ways that your book seeks to expand intellectual frontiers consistent with the goals of the "Politics and Culture in Modern America" series?

BT: So, Casey, the thing is—this is an interesting question you pose, because—and it gets into the politics and practices of publishing. I love my editor at U. Penn Press, Bob Lockhart. He is amazing! Penn Press has been great. But I did not choose to be part of that series. I allowed my book to be included in that series, and in fact, I was not really thinking about the series to the extent that I have never read that description that you just described. And we can get into the ways in which academic books are written, edited, ultimately published. That being said, I do not mind being part of the series, but it was not the same. Usually, when you are part of a series, you go through the vetting process with the editors, and then the series editors will also go through it, or the series editors recruit your book—usually recruit the book to be part of the series. That is not the case. I know Thomas Sugrue, but he was not part of the editing and soliciting and writing evaluation process for the book. But your question still is a good one, and I think the themes of the series are excellent. I do think it is worth a conversation and thinking about. I have not had that question posed to me in that way, to think about the way that my book, let us say, pushes the frontiers of—what is the last part of that, intellectual?

CV: It was "… motivated by a desire to reverse the fragmentation of modern U.S. history and to encourage synthetic perspectives on social movements and the state, on gender, race, and labor, and on intellectual history and popular culture."

BT: Okay, very good. So one thing about me and my book is that I am not a historian of the United States, so I am coming at the US and Mickey Leland and what I am calling the "African life of black radicalism" in the 1980s, and really trying to situate this decade and make sense of what it really meant, the 1980s as a period—as a distinct historical period, not "post-anything," not a precursor to something, but the '80s as something worth reckoning with historically. But I am coming at it as someone trained in African history, as someone who is—most of my work, I am writing on Africa. And so that means that—it meant a lot of relearning US history, correcting preconceived notions that I had about Reagan, about the nature of anti-communism in the United States, about the US left, *et cetera*, and bringing my African—my "scholar of Africa hat" to US history, and marrying the two. But that also means, as someone trained in African history, we are—many of us are very concerned with non-state actors – typical of social historians, people on the ground—capturing the voices of those marginalized people, bringing the margins to the middle. And so what I have tried to do is not just write a biography, but use the format of a biography – use the individual – to tell, as I said in my stump, these broader histories plural. So histories of movements, histories of humanitarianism, histories of protest, histories of foreign relations and diplomacy, and also the history of black political figures. But also I wanted to tell a story—that is a very elite history, because Mickey Leland was a member of Congress, right? So I also wanted to get some voices on the ground. And so the ways in which I do that is, I travelled to Ethiopia. And part of the stories of the famines from the Western sense is that, on television, we are seeing feeding camps filled with seemingly helpless people, mostly mothers and

children. We are seeing foreign workers, usually whites, who are responding to this famine, right? We are seeing planes. And that is our story of the famine – that is what I am calling the "famine narrative." But it is—it is a true narrative in the sense that we are perceiving that and responding to that with donations to UNICEF, or politicians lobbying for a government response, or volunteer relief organizations responding. It is real, in a sense. But it is not the experience of Ethiopians. It was not the experience of most Ethiopians. Most Ethiopians responded to the food crisis in different ways, myriad ways – not just going and seeking help. Most were helping themselves, and the government was helping them as well. So I had to go there and I had to see the spaces where these feeding centers were. That is part of my method. I also had to see Ethiopians on the ground, and I do not speak the local language, so I could not bring that into the book. But I have read translations of writings, Ethiopian writings, on the food crisis, and I used poetry as well – poetry that talks about the experiences of farmers and how they are dealing with this crisis, and bringing that into the book – to say that there is this famine narrative in the West, but there is a very different famine experience in Ethiopia. So my method is always to think about—broader than just the events that happened, and the individuals and issues driving the events, but the experiences, right? How do we capture these experiences? How do we imagine what the places might have smelled like and looked like for these individuals? Even for Mickey Leland. He made seven delegations, the seventh was a deadly one, but the previous six, he was going to these feeding centers, and I wanted to capture what he might have seen, what he might have smelled, what the air might have felt like. Because that is an important part of that history. Also, in terms of intellectually—usually, we think of international relations as government-to-government, not showing the ways that individuals who are in and out of the government shape foreign policy, shape engagement between countries, in Ethiopia, in the Caribbean, in South Africa, as I write about. So it is not just government. Government is individuals, actors, people on the ground—individuals on the ground communicating with each other in common cause and solidarity, particularly in the case of South Africa. So part of the method is to get beyond just the sources that we can touch and read, to capture experiences. And also part of the method is to being people up from the margins, sort of the subaltern – combining subaltern history that we get from South Asian scholars historically with traditional international relations history, with diplomatic history. So we have the government level, but it is also on the ground. It is not easy. It takes a lot of rewrites. It takes a lot of critical thinking. But I think if we do it, and do it reasonably well, we get a full sense of the period and what it meant, and the possibilities that the people involved in these events foresaw.

CV: Well, very fascinating, and I am glad that you went into that, for myself and for our audience. I mean, as someone who is trying to embark on sort of a comparable project myself of trying to integrate, less, kind of—well, [having] high politics perspectives from foreign relations history, but also integrating—

BT: Yeah, the high politics – even that is sort of difficult to reconstruct, because what do you produce so many papers – this is pre-email. There was email, but it was not being used in that way. So you have so many documents from the '50s and '60s and '70s and '80s – what do you choose to leave out? Because you have to leave out something. And what do you choose to include? And

then that is difficult, and there is also the task of getting the voices on the ground and their experience – also very, very difficult, intellectually, to think about and imagine, and to synthesize. So it is a tough task, but I think if we do it—as I said, if we do it and do it reasonably well, it gives us a fuller, more robust picture of past events.

CV: Yeah, absolutely. And I guess I am wondering then—well, I guess maybe to get back into some of the specific components of your book—one of my questions that I posed earlier, or that I alluded to earlier – and that you alluded to earlier as well – was examining what are the affinities and differences in ideology, strategy, and approach between Mickey Leland and other African-American policymaking contemporaries – Ralph Bunche, Ron Dellums, Andrew Young are different people that come up in your book, for instance – but then also from the kind of civil society actors that were in the Civil Rights movement and were in the Black Power movement that perhaps did not want to engage in politics. What sort of—how did Mickey Leland taking things in a more policymaking direction affect the movement and maybe bring more people over to that perspective, and what merits did you see in the more civil society approaches? Not that they were not—not that you could always separate them, by any means.

BT: Sure, yeah. He was—so, I described him as unique. He was unique in his personality, in his drive, and just the diversity of issues that he was engaging. Which is not uncommon for members of Congress – they have signature issues that they hold over other issues. But just his relations with—his relations abroad [were] really unique. And I will get back to this sort of community, civil society engagement that you set up there. But, for example, he has this personal relationship with Mengistu Haile Mariam, who is the head of state of Ethiopia. He had a personal relationship with him, and he kind of had to, because he led these delegations over there, he wanted access. Meaning that, in particular, his Republican colleagues would criticize him for colluding with the communists and being soft on the communists, ignoring [Mariam's] human rights record. He had close ties with Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, he has this direct line. Again, there are ways to look at policy at a high level, and then we have mid-level – he is a mid-level actor with direct ties to individuals on the African continent. He had very close ties with Fidel Castro, and he made several trips to Cuba. He was one of the few members of Congress that Fidel Castro had a personal relationship with. He would speak to other members of Congress, he intervened particularly in issues surrounding Americans being arrested in Cuba and being released. But Mickey Leland had a personal relationship with him. So just these dynamic ties that he had abroad allowed him to engage in more foreign policy issues in a unique way. That is his unique characteristic, I think. But he really is pushing a tradition of black politics in America, and in that way, he is not so unique. And I liked him as a historical figure for that reason, because he is part of a legacy of African-Americans engaging Africa, African-Americans being in solidarity calls with African movements, whether it is apartheid in South Africa, or independence in Gold Coast (which becomes Ghana), independence in Kenya, the civil war in Algeria for independence against France. African-Americans were engaged in that, and Mickey Leland represents that legacy, even back to—if you read the African-American historic newspapers, this deep, deep, deep engagement with India and this valorization of Gandhi and his movement, based around whether his past nonviolent

civil disobedience would be a model for African-Americans. They are doing this—this is in the 1920s and 1930s, and after independence in the 1940s, African-Americans engaged with this. And again, not all African-Americans, but this is common in the press to see these stories. So he falls in this line. What is different is that in the 1950s, it enters Congress with the first group—the growing group of post-Reconstruction African-American members of Congress. That is different. So, in 1955, there are only three members of Congress: Dawson – I forgot where he was from, and I do not have my notes here; Powell from Harlem; and Charles Diggs from Michigan. And what I write about in the book is that Charles Diggs lays the model for what Leland and Dellums—you mentioned Dellums—and our own from Philadelphia, Congressman Bill Gray – who we now have our train station named after him, he is responsible for Temple University have their SEPTA station—but they in particular are, again, a small but radical, impactful group of African-Americans engaged in foreign affairs. What they are doing as members of the Congressional Black Caucus – this group of—this kind of collective of African-Americans who strategized together and voted as a bloc – they were deeply invested in foreign affairs. And I will tell you why – I will stretch back to Charles Diggs in 1955, and his caucus. And he realizes that he cannot gain traction on domestic issues that are important to African-Americans, because most of his colleagues are racist and they are not going to support issues that advance African-American causes. So he immediately pivots to foreign policy. And he also comes from an activist background, obviously, from the Midwest, so he is a union guy, and he brings that ethos with him into Congress, and he—but he begins to deeply engage Africa. At this point, all but just a few African territories are colonies, so he is pushing to raise Africa's profile in Congress, for the United States to deal with African territories and see them as legitimate, significant foreign policy issues, but in particular in South Africa, where there is white minority rule. So he brings that into Congress and is pushing it. Now, he does not have a whole lot of support, but he also does not have a whole lot of resistance to that. But what he does is he organizes delegations to African territories, he protests in Congress, he protests outside of Congress on issues in solidarity and in coalition with other activist organizations in the United States and abroad. And he uses the media in a very savvy way. He continues to push this, and as the numbers of African-Americans grow, so too does his influence, because he is able to bring these voices together. And in 1972, he brings them together in the Congressional Black Caucus. That is when the Congressional Black Caucus was formed, continuing this practice of focusing on foreign affairs primarily, but not ignoring domestic issues – protests in and out of Congress, leading delegations to Africa, elevating Africa's profile within Congress, and using the news media in a very, very savvy way. And this is Charles Diggs, and he continues this and holds Congress engaged in African affairs. He helped to found TransAfrica, which is an African-American foreign policy lobby. So he is—again, you have organizations outside of Congress, as well as inside of Congress. And he also is central to creating the "Free South Africa" movement, which really gains traction in the early years of the 1980s, and Dellums is central to that – Ron Dellums, who is a congressman from Oakland. And by the time we get to the '80s, now we have twenty-seven African-Americans in Congress, a robust Congressional Black Caucus. But of this small group, most are interested in housing issues and employment issues and issues of crime bills, *et cetera*,

but this small but impactful group – Dellums, Alan Wheat, Mickey Leland in particular—he is chair of the Congressional Black Caucus from 1985-86 – are raising South Africa's profile, as I said at the outset. But the point is just about your question and his relations with these other people, where he stands. It was very clear that African-Americans in the 1960s could not just gain their rights and have their equality recognized and advance their interests just through protest organizations, and just through legal—lawsuits and all of that stuff, they cannot rely on the Supreme Court, and they cannot rely on the federal government. They had to use electoral politics as well. And so it is not as if there were these silos of African-American activism and engagement with political issues. They are in common cause. So many of the people who are schoolteachers, many of the people who are union organizers, they need the activists, they need the lawyers, right? And they also need the elected officials. So he was very, very close with many different figures – not Bunche so much, Bunche pre-dated him, but he is in the legacy of Bunche, kind of in a different way. Because Bunche represents the UN. He worked at the UN, he has to speak for the UN. Mickey Leland spoke for his constituents. That is the power of being within—being a member of Congress. And what I am saying is unique about this group that he was a part of as well, and gets into these other issues that I raise, is that he and Dellums, Gray to a slightly lesser extent, they saw themselves as not just representing their constituents, not just representing the United States, but they represented the Global South. They were trying to speak to people from the Caribbean, speak to African nations, and bring them into Congress. So [they were] very much global actors, and that is what is different about elected officials today, African-American elected officials – they do not have—most of them do not have that same internationalist mindset, and for many reasons that we can get into. But I hope that speaks to the thrust of your question there.

CV: Yeah, definitely. Thank you for that! And I guess maybe now it might be an opportune time to pivot into the more African side of things, and looking at the geopolitics of food aid that you examine. And I was going to mention that one recent CENFAD guest speaker who spoke on comparable subjects of disaster relief was Dr. Julia Irwin. She noted that at different times, such as under the Kennedy administration in 1963—she was looking at the case-studies of Haiti and Cuba. And the United States was actually more eager to provide relief, ironically enough, to communist and adversarial states, because they perceived that they could curry favor with the populace and embarrass the governments of those countries. And then in some anti-communist states, they were more reluctant to provide aid. And I guess I was wondering, based on that, could you outline whether you saw similar or different attitudes informing the approaches of US policymakers in different administrations and at different times that you examine in your book? And then how did Leland's own approach, [that being] "evaluating African issues on their merits," as you put it, "rather than with a Cold War litmus test," – you say that in the third chapter – fit into those dynamics? So, for instance, in what ways was it kind of an outgrowth of earlier approaches – Leland's kind of approach to food relief and disaster aid in general – and in what ways were his emphases distinctive, like bringing this energy of the Congressional Black Caucus to the geopolitics of food aid?

BT: So there is a lot in that question. There is some good stuff. I would argue that

Leland represents the standard American response to humanitarian crises, as conceived in the 1960s. It gained steam in '67-'70 with the Biafra War and the resulting famine. If you have the resources and you respond—and you really see a growth of it, actually, in the aftermath of the Biafra War. It is really where humanitarian relief as we saw it in the '80s took shape outside of—around the Nigerian civil war. And also his ideas around human rights as conceived in the '60s and '70s – he held onto some of these ideas. Now the change is Reagan. Reagan was very, very different. He fundamentally believed that we should not provide any assistance to communist countries, because that is aiding and abetting communism, and Reagan stood fundamentally in opposition to that position. But Reagan held the belief that our food aid should either be to support our allies or, as you say, sway those who may not be totally aligned with our foreign policy position, but not those that are opposed to us. In his eyes, communists are opposed to us, so if a communist country has a crisis, the United States should not respond to that. And so, again, Mickey Leland is—it is a good question that you ask, because it allows me to frame out what I was saying before. So he is not only bringing his Black Power and Civil Rights sensibilities and ethos with him into Congress, but he is also truer to the tradition of humanitarianism into the 1980s. But also he is a useful figure to look into humanitarianism, the way that he is engaging in a conversation with the international community – the Red Cross, *Médecins Sans Frontières*, others like Catholic relief charities. Because we are at a point when humanitarianism does—humanitarian intervention does mean relief, and it does mean bringing food aid and supplies. What we see – he died in '89 – what we see toward the end of the decade and into the '90s [is] that humanitarian interventions become military. And humanitarian agencies grow to such a scale that there is no oversight, and there is no accountability. So he could not have foreseen that – I believe that he would not have predicted that humanitarian intervention would be tied to a military intervention. And I doubt he would have predicted—well, he might have seen the rumblings of it. Just how the grand scale of humanitarian relief organizations—they are very large, and there is no oversight, and if there is a disaster or a crisis, they come in, and they are not accountable to anybody. And their record is not that great. Now, that is not me saying that I do not think that they should come in when there is a crisis – in the short-term, people need food. But what happens is that, as we have seen in many parts of the world, conflicts are prolonged because combatants do not need to worry about civilians because the NGOs are going to do that. Heads of state that are engaged in civil crises do not have to worry about civilians because NGOs are going to do that. Thus, the crisis is prolonged, [because] they do not have to deal with the casualties on the ground – civilian casualties on the ground. So he stands at an important inflection point in the idea of humanitarianism. I suggest that he is more of a traditionalist in terms of humanitarianism. And we see toward the end of his life and into the next decade the ways in which there is a radical change around shifting perspective on what "humanitarianism" is, what it means to "intervene," and then what are the structures of these organizations, and what is the oversight, and who is accountable—who are they accountable to?

CV: Well, great. And that is kind of a fascinating segway into another question of mine. And it is interesting that, as you point out, he is at this inflection point of, I think, human rights becoming elaborated as an

idea initially in the 1970s, but then sort of dovetailing with Reagan's neoconservatism later on, and you saw sort of antecedents of that even in the Carter era with, perhaps, [Zbigniew] Brzezinski's kind of more militarized approach, standing kind of awkwardly alongside Cyrus Vance's diplomatic engagement approach. And those sort of merging in the Reagan administration with the neoconservatives and trying to militarize humanitarian intervention, [which] emerged in the 1990s more strongly, and then particularly into the twenty-first century. And I guess I was curious, were there a lot of ways that you saw Leland's ideas on Leland's part, but that the elaboration of transnational human rights norms wedded to certain intellectual/ideological programs – this kind of "end of history," Fukuyama—or like Samuel Moyn's thesis on human rights in the 1990s, as they developed post-1970s – do you see that he had kind of a lasting legacy on those human rights norms, whether he intended it or not, and what are the kind of lasting ramifications, even into the present era, that you see of Mickey Leland?

BT: Yeah. I have to think about that. In some ways, it is quite the opposite in terms of legacy. You know, his goal, of course, is a free South Africa. His goal is to end homelessness – he famously slept on the streets of DC to draw attention to it, the experience of sleeping on urban streets. He wanted to use Ethiopia as an example of how the United States had the capacity to end hunger in the world. He had a lot of issues – anti-nuclear proliferation, he wanted land rights for Native Americans, universal healthcare. He had a lot of issues that he wanted. None of them have become part of our political reality. None of them have come to fruition. And so, as an example, I think my project and the book that resulted from it—it is an example of the importance of writing on not just people who succeeded in achieving their goals, but people whose efforts to achieve those goals is also worth looking at, and also people who did not achieve their goals – failed efforts. I would not say Mickey Leland's was a failed effort, but he did not—his goals did not materialize. And so those are worth exploring as well – to look at this moment [and] what stood in his way of achieving those goals, and how he came up with those goals in the first place. So I think the world we live in, in terms of—and, again, as you know Casey, I am a historian, so I am not going to pontificate on our current political climate too much, because I have the skills for that when we are not being recorded. But on human rights, on humanitarianism, his—we do not see the fruits of his labor. I think we have gone in a completely different direction. But just in general, I think with his political legacy, we see the consequences of our political system where, in his day, it was not that expensive to run for Congress. And in his day, African-Americans were able to rise up the ranks of the Democratic Party. So they were not busy jockeying for seniority, and they were not caught up on the phone trying to raise money. And what you can achieve when you have that time, right? Also, the importance of people being in common cause with groups outside of Congress – that was very important for him. So I think a legacy of his is that we still have that – this type of congressperson – despite the obstacles. And I think of Alexandria Ocasio Cortez very much in the spirit of Mickey Leland, because she uses the media in a very savvy way – leading a delegation to the wall—to the border wall to raise awareness of that. She is an activist in Congress and an activist outside of Congress. I do not want to draw the parallels too closely, but we see that it is still possible. So it is the spirit that Dellums—

that Diggs created in the 1950s, and carried into the 1960s. It has not totally dissipated – it is still there. And there are still some people who have that activist energy who really want to create people-centered change in this country. It is still there. It is not as robust as it was, and the obstacles are greater, but I think he still has a legacy there. But unfortunately – just to add an editorial to it – in terms of humanitarianism and human rights, they have been weaponized in ways that we do not see the legacy of Leland, but we more see the legacy of Ronald Reagan, and just how consequential his presidency was in his approach to domestic and foreign affairs.

CV: Yeah. I guess I do not want to get too stuck in current affairs, and if you do not feel equipped to answer this question, we can move on to more historical questions – which I would like to as well – but I guess I was curious how is your book relevant to somewhat contemporary happenings? For instance, what might it have to say about the current crisis in Ethiopia that we are seeing regarding the Tigray region and its environs right now?

BT: Yeah. I do not feel—apart from it addressing issues in Ethiopia, and my time doing research in the north, which is where the [Tigray People's Liberation Front] was based, and they are apparently making their way south to Addis Ababa and last I heard they were about 150 miles outside the capital, if you believe the reports – I have been told by some of my Ethiopian colleagues that there is a lot of misinformation coming from both sides, so it is very difficult to really see what is going on there. But in terms of reading the book to help understand those issues, only in that I do address the Ethiopian student movement, and there is some carryover of that legacy into—of course, there was the dismantling of the [Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front], the governing party, and that is really the rub that the TPLF was excluded from that. And now the TPLF was very—Tigrayans are a very large part of – I do not want to get too much into the weeds – but a very large of the military. So that is kind of—not to do a disservice to the background of the conflict, but what I write about is that in the 1950s and '60s, Ethiopia had a robust student movement. And one of the issues that they were grappling with was how Ethiopia can include these different nationalities, these different ethnic groups, into a federated state. And it was never really resolved. It was addressed, but not resolved. So what we are seeing now is that "nationalities question" coming back again – where is Tigray compared to Amhara compared to Oromo. And many of the students active in the student movement of the 1960s and 1970s are [editor's note: indecipherable] of events today. So to that extent, I do address the origins of it, but I would not in any way claim to be an expert or a scholar of Ethiopian history. I think my—is my internet okay? Is it freezing up?

CV: So far, I have been able to hear you, and your image is coming through.

BT: Okay. Because I got a message saying that my internet was unstable. But other than that, I think it does not really address this crisis *per se*. But one issue is that Mickey Leland—I am writing about a figure who is not very well-known today in the United States outside of Houston, Texas, where he is from, and Washington DC, where many of his colleagues – former colleagues – still live. But he is very well-known in Ethiopia. He is very well-known in Ethiopia! You do not have to do any background—even for young people, they know Mickey Leland, because he was coming from this capitalist country, he was one of the good Americans,

right? And when he came to Ethiopia, he engaged with the people. The government-run Ethiopian Herald wrote approvingly of Mickey Leland. There are streets named after him after he died. There were—there are schools named after him. And it is common to find young people named Mickey – I am not saying that it is like Jacob or a common name here, but it is a name and people know it. And so his legacy lives on in Ethiopia, as an example. But he is also an idea—he embodies the possibility of reconciliation between the United States and Ethiopia. This goes back into a little history – it is not the present day – but Ethiopia and the United States today have diplomatic ties, and they are considered allies, regional allies. Ethiopia famously assisted—the United States and Ethiopia worked together in so-called "anti-terrorism initiatives" in the region, including Somalia, to detrimental effect – we will go into that. But the turning point in this relationship is when Mickey Leland went missing, because he was friends with the Ethiopian government and he is also friends with George H.W. Bush, the first Bush president – he was president in '89 when Mickey Leland's plane was initially missing. And then there was a joint US-Ethiopian military operation to find Mickey Leland's plane. People do not know this – I write about it in the book: it is the largest military search for a US civilian in the history of this country. And the search went on for about six days, and Ethiopian diplomats are communicating with their American counterparts. And Mengistu and George Bush are communicating directly to each other, as I write about in the book. So one of Mickey Leland's goals, of course, was to restore diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and the United States, going back to this idea that he did not believe that anti-communism should form the basis of foreign policy, that the Cold War is an illegitimate way of dealing with foreign affairs. But in this moment of crisis, searching for Mickey Leland's plane – ultimately finding his plane – the US and Ethiopia began to communicate again. Now, it is not that that event alone did this. There was the beginnings—Mickey Leland was beginning to have some success in bringing Ethiopia and the United States into conversation. Herman Cohen, who was in the Bush administration at the time, was beginning to reach out to his Ethiopian counterparts. But after Mickey Leland's death, the doors of communication were wide open. In fact, in 1991, the US helped broker peace talks in the civil war in Ethiopia, leading to the end of the Mengistu regime. So there is some relevance to what is going on today, but it is more rooted—I take it as, this is a historical moment that allows us to look back at past events, and some sense of where things are going. But the particular crisis that we are confronting today – there is a connection, but it is not particularly insightful for understanding the nature of it. I am saying my book is not a guide to understanding [that].

CV: Yeah. Well, that makes sense, and I still appreciate you providing insight into what your book perhaps can tell us about what is going on in Ethiopia right now. Also, I think that shows—what you just kind of elaborated shows that Mickey Leland did have, I guess, an impact on US-Ethiopian relations, and with the breakdown of the Cold War. Obviously, we cannot credit the whole kind of rapprochement between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the communist world and the anti-communist world, at the end of the 1980s—we cannot credit that solely to Mickey Leland, obviously, but that he did have this sort of instrumental role in facilitating rapprochement.

BT: Oh, yeah! Yeah. And it is important to recognize that, when we talk about the end of the Cold War—and what do people say, they say "when the Berlin Wall fell." It continued in Africa for much longer than that. It continued on – this communism/anti-communism [struggle], and its consequences. We say the Cold War made domestic and regional issues in Africa international, because East and West are getting involved, and Cuba as well. But Mickey Leland is an example – as you say, it is not him alone, but he is an example of these individuals and organizations that were doing the hard work of reconciliation throughout the Cold War. He comes up until then [indecipherable], but he also does things like travel to the Soviet Union. There is a food crisis in Mozambique as a consequence of the civil war there, and he goes to the Soviet Union and he works out a plan where the Soviet Union and the United States would join together – this was in, I want to say, '87. It might have been later than that – '87, '88. I cannot remember if it was Bush or Reagan who was doing it – it might have been Reagan, because it was around '87. He goes to the Soviet Union, and he works out a plan where the Soviet Union and the United States would join together in helping to broker a peace deal in the Mozambican civil war between the FRELIMO government and RENAMO, but also to bring humanitarian assistance to Mozambique. The plan involved Soviet planes bringing US food aid to Mozambique – somewhat symbolic, but meaningful. The Soviet Union signed off on it, Gorbachev signed off on it and supported the deal. The US initially supported the deal, but then later on said, "well, we would prefer if it is Angola," so that it made it fall apart. But the point is that he is an example of the ways in which the Cold War is going to end in Africa – not just through government-to-government relations, but also through the hard work of lower-level government officials and people on the ground. And it was this long, tenacious slog to bring about this rapprochement.

CV: Well, very good. And then, I guess, stemming from that—I mean, since we mentioned the anti-apartheid struggle earlier in passing, but perhaps have gone more into detail on Ethiopia and Leland's work there. But I guess, since the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and the global anti-apartheid solidarity with the [African National Congress] and so on—with that being a major theme in your book as well, I guess maybe we could touch more on how did Leland's activism on African and Third World issues overall basically foment—well, not foment, but had an important contribution to the global anti-apartheid struggle and popularizing that—

BT: – Oh, absolutely! –

CV: —not only in the United States, but everywhere.

BT: Yeah. Oh, absolutely, absolutely! South Africa was not the only significant African affairs issue for the United States, but it was the largest, in part because South Africa at the time had the largest economy, the US was South Africa's most significant trading partner at the time – it previously had been Britain, but then it became the United States. And there is this long history of partnership. And, not discounting the Reagan administration's perspective – and previous administrations' perspective—sorry, South Africa had an anti-communist at the center of its legal system. Anything that was against apartheid or against the white minority regime was considered "communism," but coupled with that is this narrative that the white minority regime pushed that "if we fall, and we become a

black-ruled nation, it is going to open the door to communists – and there is no way that the communists will not come in here and take over." So the United States was an important partner to South Africa. But South Africa was important to the African-American movement and the pan-Africanist world because it was the last stronghold for white minority rule. So if we begin with—I talked about Diggs, who was very anti-imperialist [and] anti-colonialist when he enters Congress, and pushes for the end of colonial rule in Africa. But then, as that European footprint shrinks, it comes down to southern Africa. So once we get to '75, it is only in southern Africa, where we have foreign colonialism and white minority regimes in southern Africa. So southern Africa becomes this focus, and this is useful, because it is easy to get a consensus. South Africa is an easy consensus, because we know who the "good guys" are and we know who the "bad guys" are – we know the white minority regime is "bad" and those opposing it [are] "good," so it is easier to rally around that. And so it was a useful organizing tool. When we get to the 1980s, then we have this global anti-apartheid movement, and the United States government is slowly coming around to that. And the Congressional Black Caucus is at the heart of that, and TransAfrica and the "Free South Africa" movement, but Mickey Leland is the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus in the 1980s – in '85 and '86. This is when, finally, after decades of trying to get sanctions on South Africa, a sanctions bill comes up in Congress. Mickey Leland is the chair, and it passes. I described, earlier, Reagan's response to that. Mickey Leland wanted a similar movement for hunger and for Ethiopia, to get a global response to it – grassroots, government, [and] NGOs together, focusing on Ethiopia. A little more complicated, right? You are not going to get the same kind of consensus on the issue. There is not the same history of engaging food crises. Many people saw South Africa as parallel to the [US] Civil Rights movement, so that was the history. So he was not able to get the same sort of attraction, but it is because so many people were focusing on South Africa that he – as is true to most congresspeople – wanted a signature issue, so he chose Ethiopia as his issue. That is going to be his issue, and he is going to bring others to it, [but] never quite got there. But South Africa is also important because it shows you how complicated foreign policy issues are for consensus. Now African-Americans were rock-solid against apartheid, and of course rock-solid against colonialism in general. But once apartheid ends in 1994, when we have democratic elections, foreign policy issues in Africa become a little more complicated for those on the continent and for those abroad. So at the same time we have South Africa, we also have Rwanda – the genocide in Rwanda. TransAfrica, African-American elected officials, activists on the ground, [and] grassroots actors did not respond to Rwanda like they responded to apartheid in South Africa, because it is more complicated – we do not know who are the "good guys" and who are the "bad guys." Similarly, Leland is trying to get attention for Ethiopia in the midst of a civil war, so Mengistu and the TPLF and the EPLF – who are these people? We do not know who the "good guys" are and who are the "bad guys." The crisis in Darfur is similar – it is hard to grapple with. So with race and racism at the center of affairs, it is easier to grapple with the issues, similar to the United States and communism, right? "Communists" – we do not like you, "anti-communists" – we like you. Absent communism, absent the Cold War, foreign policy becomes complicated, and it is difficult to engage. And so we see this kind of unraveling of a consensus on foreign policy within and among African-

American elected officials. In similar ways, we see the unraveling of solidarity on foreign policy issues after the fall of the Soviet Union—well, it did not really fall, but the ending of the Soviet Union, beginning with Gorbachev. And so we do not see the same consensus, and we see that today, because foreign policy in Africa is more complicated. In fact, they are not engaging Africa—actually, they are engaging Africa. African-American elected officials are engaging Africa, but it is not getting the same traction and there is not the same consensus. There is not the same enthusiasm for it as there was when they were battling colonialism and white minority rule. So it is a very, very different terrain. And so his place—again, [it was] a major inflection point, a major turning point for capturing the 1980s as this last moment when African-Americans—really, I say that African-Americans were at their most powerful, because they had this consensus on foreign policy, and unique influence on foreign policy toward the [African] continent and toward the Caribbean as well. When Reagan invaded Grenada in 1984, I believe it was – '83, '84?

CV: '83, I think.

BT: It is when African-American officials respond to that, and say "Reagan should be impeached for violating international law by invading Grenada." So it is not the same sort of consensus that we have that they had then – what we have now. This was a major turning point in the 1980s – I think it was the last moments of this solidarity.

CV: Well, very good. And we are probably getting toward the end of what we want to—I guess, the duration of our conversation. But, yeah, this is obviously very topical, to discuss Leland's role in the anti-apartheid struggle as the end of these opportunities for solidarity on geopolitical issues that became more complex in the aftermath of that. You know, with the death just yesterday of the controversial South African apartheid-era president—

BT and CV (in unison): – F.W. de Klerk –

CV: —who won the Nobel Peace Prize.

BT: I am interested in seeing how people write about him. I always say that, if you want good things to be said about you no matter how you lived your life, go ahead and die. Suddenly, people have nice things to say about you. So I am resisting reading what they say about de Klerk – who won the Nobel Peace Prize with Mandela and was very instrumental in bringing a conclusion to the apartheid era, but was also the head of a white minority regime in a majority black country in which the violation of human rights was fundamental to sustaining that regime. So, let us see what people say about him.

CV: And I guess to follow up from that—I mean, did you have anything else that we have not covered about the book that you think is kind of an important component or thing to add to the conversation, or what is your overall intervention in the historiography and what would you like to see emerge from it?

BT: Well, to answer that question, I think I will leave it to the reviewers. I am pleased that I have had some very nice reviews. People have engaged the book seriously. I hope people read it, not just for the sake of reading the book, but I am really invested in this idea of looking at the 1980s as this historical moment. And I think my book is part of that project. It was an important moment, and it has significance for our politics now, not just in the US but globally.

I hope people learn from the strategy of combining government and elected officials – their voices – with those people on the ground, using the strategy of a multiplicity of voices to give meaning and form and substance to a particular time period. And also just to appreciate that writing a book is very hard. It takes a lot of time, particularly when you are teaching and have a family. And just, when you are writing, you rewrite and you rewrite and you edit and you rewrite – it is a process, and tenacity pays off. And I think my book is a testament to it, the benefits of tenacity, and being humble and being able to have some teflon when people criticize you, and it is worth it in the end.

CV: Well, great. And I certainly appreciated your work – it was a very engaging book in my estimation.

BT: Thank you!

CV: And, yeah, I hope more people will read it. And I would just like to thank you, Dr. Talton, for speaking to CENFAD for the upcoming issue of *Strategic Visions*, and I look forward to seeing your interview published – hopefully in print form, as well as including this video, because I would like to write up a written transcript. But, yeah, thank you so much for joining us today!

BT: Okay. Thank you, Casey!