

EXCURSUS I

Richard John Neuhaus on Idi Amin in Black and White

The fall of Idi Amin, "the butcher of Uganda," has been cheered by almost everybody. Almost. It is said that some white South Africans lament his passing. The murderous clown was for years a stock piece in South African propaganda that equated decency and sanity with white rule. Amin was also a painful embarrassment to many of the independent black-led countries of Africa. With few exceptions, however, African leaders remained publicly silent about his atrocities, and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) could take no action, lest it provoke awkward questioning about political and human rights in other African countries.

The horror of Amin's regime can hardly be exaggerated. Among the first detailed accounts of his grotesque leadership was "An Ambassador's Reflection on a Bloodbath" by Thomas Melady, the last U.S. ambassador to Uganda (*Worldview*, May, 1974). Thousands had their heads bashed in by sledgehammers, tens of thousands were brutally tortured by the state security apparatus and their bodies tossed into the rivers to feed the crocodiles. The new government estimates that at least half a million people were killed by the Amin regime. All this while African leaders remained silent and some American apologists attributed atrocity reports to CIA lies and hailed Amin as a courageous leader in alliance with Libya and other "progressive" forces.

It is difficult to remember that the U.S. and other Western countries acclaimed Amin's coup against Milton Obote in 1971. I recall a dinner in the capital city of Kampala shortly after Amin came to power. My host, who had been imprisoned under the Obote regime, and who has now "disappeared," spoke warmly of Amin's congenial nature, noting that the general drove unguarded through the city. The story was that Amin had had a dream that revealed the precise time and circumstances of his death, and he therefore felt no need to take precautions against the inevitable. Amin was then praised as the liberator of Uganda. In Mozambique, Angola, Central African Empire, and a host of other countries, Africa has not dealt kindly with hopes for liberation.

Twenty years after the great surge of decolonization and seventeen years after the establishment of the OAU, the heartrending truth is that in many instances the people of Africa are more oppressed than they were under colonial rule. That unhappy fact is largely the product of the nineteenth-century colonial boundaries drawn in defiance of the tribal realities of the continent. Where people and nation are not matched, the tasks of "nation building" seem almost impossible. The "nation" seems to be mostly fictional, and authoritarianism is viewed as

inevitable in order to override the natural loyalties of peoples. However arbitrary and irrational the national boundaries may be, it is the first principle of the OAU that they must be respected. Any step toward a more "rational" matching of peoples and nations would, it is feared, throw the entire continent into bloody and open-ended conflict. African rejoicing over the fall of Amin is therefore tempered by anxiety because it was brought about by the invasion of Uganda by Tanzanian troops. Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere notes that he acted in response to Uganda's prior aggression against Tanzania. While that argument will no doubt be accepted publicly by most states, it will not put to rest worries about Tanzania's precedent in violating the rule of live-and-let-live (some call it "African solidarity") that restrains states from interfering with their neighbors, no matter how ghastly the provocation.

While the fall of Amin removes the most publicized of Africa's tyrants, he was unfortunately not alone. Data from groups like Amnesty International and from the scrupulously balanced index issued by Freedom House paint a depressing picture of violations of elementary political and human rights in independent Africa. According to the judiciously calibrated categories of Freedom House, more than half of the forty-seven member states of OAU are definitely "Not Free," only two are "Free," and the rest are "Partly Free." (The two "Free" nations are tiny Gambia and Botswana. Botswana, with 750,000 people, is largely the creation of, and is entirely surrounded by, South Africa.)

In order to understand the ferocity of the problem it is not necessary to focus on countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda, or Burundi, which have undergone revolutions or other massive turmoil in recent years (Rwanda and Burundi have been engaged in Cambodia-scale genocide, although it has been little remarked by the outside world). More "stable" regimes such as Benin, Central African Empire, Equatorial Guinea, Malawi, Niger, and Mali are all ruthlessly oppressive. Widespread torture, executions without charge or trial, political prisoners by the many thousands, and even massive forced labor (slavery) mar much of independent Africa. Even Tanzania, which some propose as a model of more benign "African socialism" and whose president, Julius Nyerere, is often called the "conscience" of Africa, holds two to three thousand reported political prisoners; torture and killing by the state police is reportedly common, and millions of people have been forced into communal villages.

The case of Tanzania is especially depressing to friends of independent Africa. Nyerere is a winsome personality and a Christian intellectual of great persuasive force. He once explained to me at length why one-party rule is necessary, and "the Westminster model" inappropriate, in Africa. "We don't need an opposition party. In a family everyone is free to express his opinion and to disagree if he wants to. Isn't it absurd to set up a system in which

you pay a person to say No, just because he's supposed to be the opposition? In our system he is free to say No or to say Yes, depending upon the particular question." Of course the point in Tanzania is not that nobody is paid to say No but that, in fact, nobody is permitted to say No; or at least they cannot say it in a way that is not agreeable to the rule of Julius Nyerere.

Rationalizations for dictatorship abound. The more benign focus on the peculiar tribal realities of Africa, the more malicious allude to racial and other inferiorities. One form of racism is the statement that Africans are not capable of "our kind" of democratic governance (as though the desire to form and express opinions or to live free from political terror are peculiarly Western values). Strangely enough, that kind of argument is employed both by the defenders of South African apartheid and by the apologists for black dictatorships. In recent conversation with a high State Department official who is intimately involved in negotiations regarding South Africa, we agreed that, unhappily, most independent African states were dictatorships. "But people must understand," he said, "that they are not dictatorships in the ordinary sense. I really believe that, if they allowed opposition and free elections, most of the governments of independent Africa could win a plurality of support from their people. And, after all, a plurality is all it takes to elect a president in America."

It is an interesting line of argument for a spokesman of an administration deeply committed to democratic and human rights. *If* they allowed opposition, *if* they allowed free elections—yes, perhaps he is right. Drawing on the most detestable analogies, might not the same thing have been said about Stalin's rule, or about Hitler's, at least up to 1943? In sorry fact, the same thing was said about Stalin and Hitler, and is said today about most of the tyrants who keep their peoples in bondage. Apologists who profess an admiration for democratic values but who do not insist that such values be put to the test in actual practice do not in fact care very much about democratic values. Similarly, people who claim a commitment to human rights but are quite prepared to see such rights sacrificed to some "higher" political goal do not care very much about human rights. They do have strong preferences about political and economic systems, and in pursuit of those preferences, human rights and democratic process are expendable.

In 1971 U.S. policy was supportive of the coup led by Idi Amin. Today in Zimbabwe/Rhodesia, although the U.S. claims to be neutral, it is obvious to the *New York Times* and most informed observers that the U.S. is politically supporting the Patriotic Front led by Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo, who are militarily backed by the Soviet Union and Cuba. The point is not that Mugabe and Nkomo are Idi Amins, but that the U.S. has in the past been tragically inept when it intervenes in struggles

among black African leaders. And Zimbabwe/Rhodesia is now engaged in such a struggle. As another high State Department official recently stated, "Things were easier when Rhodesia was a case of black versus white. Now it's a battle among black African leaders, and our role is going to be much more difficult."



But what is "our role" in Southern Africa, and what should it be? There is a small minority in America that would no doubt favor unqualified alliance with white South Africa. Motivated in part by racism and in part by a desire to "resist the Communist tide," they are not without political influence. There are others who are sharply critical of apartheid but who are sympathetic to the fears of white South Africans. They would like to see the U.S. apply firm but essentially friendly pressure toward change. Following the election of a black-led government in Zimbabwe/Rhodesia last April, they would favor a lifting of sanctions against that country and some kind of U.S. recognition. They are impressed by the indisputable reality that, by any clear criteria, Zimbabwe/Rhodesia has a more democratic and just government than most of the countries of Africa.

There is another very vocal and influential body of opinion, however, that believes the U.S. role is to effect the overthrow of the South African Government, if necessary, in order to bring black majority rule to all of Southern Africa. Support for liberation movements in Zimbabwe/Rhodesia and in Namibia (South West Africa) are viewed as means toward

that end. While such goals are often and clearly stated, the undergirding rationale usually goes unexamined. A large part of it has to do with the uneasy conscience of the West that is peculiarly, and understandably, troubled by the oppression of blacks by whites. The white South African's injustice is abhorrent because he is one of "us"—of our civilization, our culture, our race. That is why black majority rule is grasped as a moral goal. If blacks oppress and slaughter blacks, that is "their" business; we white Westerners are not implicated in their crimes. The internal settlement in Zimbabwe/Rhodesia is not acceptable because whites ("we") still have too much power, and because the new black government there is not likely to cooperate in the staging of the main event, the assault on South Africa.

The complexity of racism's web seems almost infinite. Among those of us who opposed America's war in Indochina some reached far in order to argue that the war was essentially racist. Most people were not convinced by that line of reasoning. But nobody can deny the obvious and overwhelming factor of race in everybody's thinking about Southern Africa. Lest anyone forget, he is reminded by apartheid regulations that measure everything from the shade of skin to the shape of cuticles in order to determine what human and political rights a person is to have. Those who are most impassioned about the odiousness of apartheid believe that a majority of Americans will share their passion when they "become educated" or "have their consciousness raised" about what is going on in South Africa. But as people become more knowledgeable about what is going on throughout Africa, they will be less and less persuaded that the answer is simply majority rule, that the answer is simply racial. If there is an answer, it is to be found in a search for proximate justice beyond the racisms that are all too evident among South Africa's reactionary friends and revolutionary foes.

In its policies regarding Zimbabwe/Rhodesia, Namibia, and South Africa itself, the U.S. is now perceived as moving, or drifting, in support of the revolutionary option. It is by no means clear that the administration has popular support on this course, or even that most Americans are aware of it. So long as U.S. support for the revolutionaries is purely political, it may not become an issue of major domestic controversy. As one official puts it, "We can do what we want, short of sending arms or troops." Perhaps so, but the luxury of purely political support might be short-lived. The warning cry about "another Vietnam" has been raised too often, thus losing some of its credibility; but very sober analysts believe that South Africa could become another Vietnam. One hopes that is excessive, but, to the extent it is at all plausible, it is important to recall what many claim is the chief lesson to be learned from Vietnam: It is impossible for a democracy, even if (especially if?) it is the strongest nation in the world, to engage in a foreign conflict without a

secure consensus of domestic support. The elements of such a conflict in Southern Africa—black versus white, apparent cooperation with the purposes of the Soviet Union, and alliance with some of the most despotic regimes in the world—are a certain formula for domestic dissension that would make the Vietnam years look by comparison like an exercise in national unity.

We are, one hopes, a long way from war in Southern Africa. But there are ominous clouds gathering, while American policy appears to drift. Now is the time to search for accommodations that can hold off the all-out warfare so confidently predicted, and perhaps desired, by antagonists who refuse to recognize that the hope for justice in Southern Africa is not black or white.

EXCURSUS II

Thomas Land on Moscow and Anti-Semitism

Still embarrassed by the prewar pact between Communist Russia and Nazi Germany, Soviet propagandists are increasingly blaming the Jews for their own tragedy in the Holocaust. As the official Soviet news agency, Tass, put it recently: "The Zionists' collaboration with the Nazis led to a catastrophe which cost the lives of nearly six million Jews."

A review of Soviet publications since the 1967 Middle East war shows a continuous and intensifying anti-Semitic propaganda campaign, says the London-based Institute of Jewish Affairs in an authoritative new research study, *Soviet Anti-Semitic Propaganda*. The campaign has now reached the columns of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the influential mass-circulation daily newspaper published specifically for young people.

There are many reasons for the campaign, quite apart from Russia's culturally rooted anti-Semitism and the well-trying convenience of blaming the shortcomings of a cumbersome, centrally planned economy on a conspicuous racial minority.

The Russian Jews demanding the right to emigrate and the more general Russian human rights campaign (whose supporters are not necessarily Jewish) have in fact won some concessions from the Kremlin under pressure from the Western mass media and in the context of détente. In return, the official anti-Semitic campaign has been intensified, associating all political dissidents in the public mind with the Jews and all Jews with a fictitious drive for world domination. Thus the United Nations resolution equating Zionism with racism, which has been dismissed in the West as a minor if odious aspect of the Middle East propaganda war, has been used in the Soviet Union as the focal point of the official anti-Semitism campaign.