Debating the Salisbury agreement

The Hard Road From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe

Richard Neuhaus

One day last February Ian Smith, head of the Rhodesian Government, sat down with three black leaders and signed an agreement that is designed to bring a majority-ruled Zimbabwe into being by the end of this year. After signing, Smith extended his hands upward and shrugged his shoulders, as though to signal his resignation to the inevitable. The black leaders were jubilant. Much of the rest of the world expressed relief that one of the nastiest conflicts in a race-conscious universe was apparently on its way to peaceful resolution. Resignation, jubilation, relief—but these are not the only reactions to what has come to be called “the internal settlement.” In Africa and elsewhere, especially at the United Nations, the settlement has been condemned by many as a sellout to continued white racism. Because it is important to understand the objections to the settlement, we will begin there.

It must be admitted frankly that the many objections are not internally coherent. That is, those protesting the settlement operate on different and sometimes conflicting assumptions about the strategic, ideological, and moral significance of Zimbabwe. Although arguments against the settlement overlap, they can be summarized in a dozen propositions.

It is said that the settlement is no settlement at all, since it does not include the Patriotic Front headed by Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe. The Front is the force actually waging the guerrilla warfare that presumably pressured Smith into change. How, it is asked, can you claim there is a truce when the other belligerent is not party to it? At best, or at worst, all the settlement does is establish a scenario for “black-on-black civil war” (Andrew Young, U.S. ambassador to the U.N.) in which the Front will be pitted against Zimbabweans supporting the black leaders who compacted with Smith.

It is said that the settlement is no settlement at all, since it does not include the Patriotic Front headed by Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe. The Front is the force actually waging the guerrilla warfare that presumably pressured Smith into change. How, it is asked, can you claim there is a truce when the other belligerent is not party to it? At best, or at worst, all the settlement does is establish a scenario for “black-on-black civil war” (Andrew Young, U.S. ambassador to the U.N.) in which the Front will be pitted against Zimbabweans supporting the black leaders who compacted with Smith.

It is wrong, the Patriotic Front asserts, to describe what has happened as a “peaceful” settlement. In fact the settlement is to be enforced by the full police and military power of the Smith regime. Smith, it is said, has simply won some unwitting black leaders to his side of the continuing war.

Partisans of the Front fear that the U.S. and Britain are itching for a settlement, for any settlement, that will give them an excuse to walk away from the problems of Zimbabwe. The joint Anglo-American plan that gave a key role to the Front apparently has shaky backing in both Britain and the U.S., and the settlement has just enough similarity to the Anglo-American proposal to permit these powers to pretend their obligations have been fulfilled. This charge about the Anglo-American failure of nerve comes strangely, but it comes nonetheless, from some of the same people who allege that the “Western imperialists” are involved in a master plan with South Africa that is designed to defeat the liberation struggles of the Third World’s oppressed.

The last theme is picked up by those who claim that the initial ambivalence of Britain and the U.S. to the settlement is only a facade; behind the facade is quiet satisfaction with Smith’s agreement because it will assure Western economic rights in Rhodesia for a long time to come. This is the thrust of a prominent story in the Washington Post (March 12), which reports the “mysterious” activities of a couple of American businessmen in Salisbury during the days immediately preceding the signing. Theorists of economic conspiracy are especially keen about the importance of Rhodesia’s chrome, lithium, and other resources required by the West.

The further objection is raised that the settlement excluded not only the Patriotic Front but perhaps as many as 50 per cent of the university-trained black Zimbabweans. Compared with other African countries, Rhodesia counts a very large number of university-trained blacks, as many as eight or ten thousand, and it is claimed that half of them are studying or working abroad (some are fighting with the Front) and that almost all of these oppose the present settlement. How can a settlement be thought legitimate if it does not take into account so large a part of the country’s leadership élite?

Many who are involved in the liberation struggle admit that the question of Zimbabwe is but a prelude to the much bigger challenge of overthrowing white racism in South Africa. The victory
of the guerrilla forces in Zimbabwe is therefore a crucial step toward that larger confrontation. A settlement that denies that victory to the guerrillas is viewed as a victory for South Africa. Proponents of this view can find ample documentation in which white South Africans have acknowledged they much prefer fighting for their system in Rhodesia than in South Africa itself.

Then it is contended that the settlement violates the most elementary sense of justice. Many have died, some have been tortured, thousands have been brutally displaced by the police action of the Smith regime. The internal settlement assumes that the police, military, and criminal justice systems will remain largely under white control for at least some years. As one black Zimbabwean said in conversation, "Just think, we are being asked even to guarantee the pensions of those who have executed our brothers and sisters!" It is not the kind of resolution that this young militant had in mind when he dreamed of the liberation of his country.

Some of the objections are very pragmatic. The settlement might be acceptable in theory, they say, but it just won't work. Of course this reasoning comes close to being a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nonetheless, many are convinced by it. Not only does the settlement not include the Patriotic Front, but, others say, it will likely not be approved by many white Rhodesians. The whites will finally not be able to stomach the reality of blacks in real and symbolic positions of power, and then the military, which will still be largely under white control, will execute a coup d'état that will overthrow the settlement and impose an even harsher version of white racist repression.

Some opponents of the settlement entertain what appear to be rather fantastical possibilities. Much is made, for example, of Smith's track record as a gambler. Just as he gambled when, in 1965, he broke from Britain with his Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), so now he is gambling on bringing about a black-on-black civil war that will force South Africa and, finally, the U.S. to his side. In this scenario the present settlement is not really the one Smith wants. He hopes that, in the negotiated ending to an escalated civil war, he will get even more favorable terms than he has at present. Robert Mugabe of the Patriotic Front goes further. At stake, according to him, is not simply the restoration of the Smith regime but a massive counterattack led by South Africa and aimed at overthrowing other liberated areas. "[Mugabe] said the strategy was part of a larger design calling for attacks on Angola, Mozambique, Zambia and Botswana" (New York Times, March 10).

The New York Times, in an editorial dismissively titled "The Rhodesian Contrivance" (March 5), claims that "the deal" struck in Salisbury is a recipe for disaster. "The way to frustrate a peaceful transition is to persist in a 'settlement' that will cause the Patriotic Front to escalate the fighting, possibly with Cuban and Soviet help...confronting the Western powers with an impossible choice of either letting Moscow and Pretoria fight it out or intervening directly. (And, if it were to be intervention, on which side?)" The Times and others have also argued that, whatever the merits or realism of the internal settlement, it is opposed by the great majority of African nations. A hard-nosed analysis of American interests demonstrates that we have less to gain from Rhodesia and South Africa than we have to lose by further alienating the black-ruled countries that are united by little else than their relentless determination to liberate Southern Africa from white control.

Finally, and perhaps most simply, the U.N. Security Council declared the Salisbury agreement "illegal and unacceptable" because Ian Smith's government, a party to the agreement, is illegal and unacceptable. The U.S. and Britain—together with Canada, France, and West Germany—abstained on the March 14 vote on a resolution that would seem to preclude the present Rhodesian Government's participating in any settlement at all. The meaning of the Security Council resolution is obscure, however, by the fact that Britain says it would have vetoed a straight condemnation of the settlement but was able merely to abstain on this one because it "leaves the door open" to bringing all the parties together in search of a better settlement. Therefore, while the language of the Security Council resolution apparently does not mean what it seems to say, the point has been made to the satisfaction of the settlement's opponents that the United Nations agrees with them. Sentiment favorable to the settlement is against "world opinion."

These, then, are the chief arguments against the settlement. It should not be thought, however, that the reaction has all been negative. Senator Clifford Case of New Jersey speaks, no doubt, for many American leaders when he calls the settlement "a fair, moderate political solution" and urges the U.S. to respond favorably to it. Before the form of the settlement was made final, CBS's "Sixty Minutes" did an in-depth feature on Rhodesia that suggested that, if such a settlement were to work, it would provide the world a unique example of peaceful transition to majority rule in a multiracial society. The Conservative party in Britain, and a very large part of the ruling Labor party, presses the government to take a more positive stance toward the Salisbury accord. On the U.S. side, Secretary Vance has met with Bishop Abel Muzorewa, the key black leader signing the agreement, and Andrew Young was publicly critical of the Security Council for not giving the bishop a chance to present the case for the settlement.

Both Young and British foreign secretary David Owen have exhibited some ambivalence about the agreement. On the one hand they insist upon the necessity of incorporating the Patriotic Front and hold out hopes for reviving the old Anglo-American plan; on the other hand they stop far short of condemning the current settlement and have said on several occasions that it is a "first step" toward a more acceptable arrangement. Most recently Owen has called for a conference of all interested parties, but this is rejected by Nkomo and Mugabe of the Front because, they say, it would mean playing into the hands of Smith.

There is reason to believe that the present Anglo-American ambivalence is a resting place on the way to a
clearer affirmation of the Salisbury accord. It is not an easy trip to make, either for the British or the Americans. There is loss of face involved. The British have never gotten over the humiliation of Smith's act of defiance in 1965. It was an ungracious taunting of the comatose lion of British imperialism. Despite all kinds of censures and sanctions, the independent government of Rhodesia was not brought to its knees. Indeed, many observers believe that international pressures only reinforced internal resolve. Nor has Smith been driven to his knees by guerrilla warfare. He came to the negotiating table while he could still come walking. The Anglo-American plan would have given the British at least a taste of vindication in having its old authority restored. The proposal that a British representative should oversee the transition might have had the appearance of righting the wrong of 1965 after all.

The Anglo-American plan also envisioned a strong United Nations role, and that would have helped with America's "image problems" in the Third World. To the credit of the Carter administration, and this is mainly the achievement of Andrew Young, a relationship of tentative trust has been established with several key African nations. This might well be jeopardized by a too hasty American approval of a Zimbabwean settlement that was immediately and scorchingly condemned by the Organization of African Unity. The phase of ambivalence is a necessary pause in the movement toward accepting a situation that, after all is said and done, may not be amenable to British or American hopes for a "best possible solution." This does not necessarily mean, as it has been claimed, that the wily Ian Smith has outfoxed everyone once again. The premise of Smith's career, it should be remembered, was that there would be no majority rule in his lifetime. The Salisbury accord represents a reversal of Smith's basic premise and promise. If the agreement holds, Smith hardly emerges as an unequivocal winner.

The U.S. and Britain should now indicate much more clearly than they have that they want the agreement to hold and will take steps that can help assure the transition's success. It is an unsatisfactory agreement, but, contra the Security Council resolution, that does not mean it is unacceptable. After ninety years of white dominance, ending up with 263,000 whites ruling 6.7 million blacks, it is hard to know what a satisfactory resolution would look like. There can be no political means of atonement or satisfaction for generations of bigotry and brutality, humiliation and exclusion. There can be a genuinely new beginning toward a more just society. As Anthony Lewis has written (March 16): "In judging the settlement, Britain and the United States are bedeviled by a familiar dilemma: We want two essentially contradictory things in Rhodesia. We want to see power pass to the country's 6.8 million Africans. But we do not want the 260,000 whites to lose confidence, leave pell-mell and destroy an economy that could help the whole area." If the agreement is given a chance, what now seems "essentially contradictory" can soon evolve into a tension and one day into an accommodation that edges toward as much justice as such conflicts permit—in Rhodesia or anywhere else.

The Security Council's point that the Smith regime, and therefore the settlement, is illegal is hard to take seriously. Legality touches upon the idea of legitimacy. In terms of the rule of law, free elections, and other aspects of democratic legitimacy, the constitution envisioned in the Salisbury accord will provide the new Zimbabwe with a great deal more legitimacy than is possessed by almost all the governments of Africa and, sad to say, most of the governments of the world.

It is charged that the provisions for protecting the interests of whites in the new agreement are excessive, that the fears of the white population are exaggerated. Anyone who has been to Rhodesia knows that it is almost impossible to exaggerate their fears. Rightly or wrongly they have keen memories of the Mau Mau period of decolonization in Kenya and elsewhere. More recently they witnessed the flight of hundreds of thousands of whites from Mozambique and Angola. In the last five years or so, tens of thousands of white Rhodesians have left the country in anticipation of a black takeover. Fear does not conform to the canons of rationality. At the same time, it is hard to say their fears are irrational when Robert Mugabe of the Patriotic Front explicitly and repeatedly says that the Front's goal is a one-party Marxist state in which official policy will include systematic reprisals against those who perpetrated or cooperated with the crimes of racist imperialism.

Those who speak of a Marxist threat are too lightly dismissed as cold warriors trying to stir up rightist sympathy in the West. The blunt truth is that Marxism is a very real specter in Southern Africa. More than a specter, the threat is embodied in Angola and Mozambique, from which thousands of black Africans have fled from their new black oppressors. In South-West Africa (Namibia), where Lutherans comprise half the population and have been in the leadership of the independence struggle, the Lutheran bishops recently spoke out against the threat. Marxism, they declared, "offers no alternative to the ideology of apartheid, which we think can be a breeding ground for Marxism." They did not explicitly mention Zimbabwe or the Patriotic Front, but they were clearly not unaware of the signing of the Salisbury agreement two weeks earlier when they stated, "Marxism is a pseudo-religion which must be rejected in all its manifestations and disguises."

White fears are not less important merely because they are exaggerated. One Patriotic Front sympathizer declared in conversation that the Salisbury agreement only means "apartheid of class rather than apartheid of race." It is a clever phrase, but it obviously suggests a different goal than majority rule or equal opportunity regardless of race. In the new Zimbabwe envisioned by the settlement, it will be a very long time indeed before there will be anything like equality of wealth between black and white. No reasonable person can doubt that the whites will remain the favored few for a long time, but beyond doubt they will be a great deal less favored than they were, and they will be compelled to everyday legal, behavioral, and economic acknowledgments that they live in an overwhelmingly black nation under an overwhelmingly black government.
The "Internal Settlement"

Elaborate electoral safeguards are designed to reassure Rhodesia's white population. For ten years or the life of two parliaments, whichever is longer, whites are guaranteed twenty-eight of the hundred parliamentary seats. Twenty of these are to be elected by whites only; the other eight will be chosen by a multiracial electorate, but the candidates would be chosen by white members of parliament. The constitution will also include guarantees regarding an independent judiciary, a bill of rights, and a nonpolitical police force and army. These protections can be removed only by a vote of seventy-eight members of parliament—which, in effect, gives whites a "blocking vote" for at least ten years.

In addition the settlement calls for a generous program of amnesty for guerrilla fighters. Those who lay down their arms will be given the opportunity to integrate into the regular armed forces or to receive vocational training, with the government footing the bill. Until the constitution is adopted and general elections are held, presumably by the end of 1978, the interim regime will be a multiracial cabinet (a black and a white for each portfolio) and a council of state. The leadership of the council will rotate on a regular basis among Smith, Muzorewa, and Ndabaningi Sithole and Jeremiah Chirau (the last two are the other black leaders signing the accord).—RN

Of course nobody really knows what it will look like ten or thirty years from now. But the Salisbury agreement assures that all Zimbabweans will have a free choice between that uncertain future and the more certain consequences of terror and economic collapse that have—almost without exception in world history, and with several unhappy examples in African history—accompanied the forced march toward a classless society.

To be sure, there is something sad about Joshua Nkomo being excluded from the settlement. Not too many people worry about the fate of Robert Mugabe. He is viewed as a shadowy and ideologically obsessed newcomer, a limited and humorless man who gained prominence by being the first and most fevered in doing the militant's shuffle to Marxist melody. But Nkomo is a different phenomenon. Physically huge, expansive, uninhibited in luxurious self-indulgence, Nkomo spent years in Rhodesian prisons because he protested injustice in the name of the democratic justice his oppressors taught in theory but scorned in practice. Rumor has it that Smith and other white leaders still think Nkomo the most outstanding candidate to head the new Zimbabwe. In fact he has not been excluded from the settlement. There are clear provisions, indeed remarkably generous provisions, for amnesty for Nkomo and all who have been involved in the Patriotic Front. The "grand old man" of Zimbabwe's independence could come back and take his chances in the election scheduled for this year. But there is the rub; his chances are thought to be not very good. He has been gone too often and too long, and his latter-day Marxist rhetoric—required for the alliance with Mugabe—has, according to most observers, further eroded whatever popular support he had among black Rhodesians. Although his electoral chances seem slim, Nkomo could probably return to the highest appointive office available, if and when he concludes that that offers a better shot at power than continued alliance with Mugabe in trying to overthrow the settlement by violence.

Even the Times, in its semihysterical initial response to the settlement, admitted that Nkomo's interests should not take priority over those of Zimbabwe. "Not even Mr. Nkomo, who enjoys a considerable political following among both blacks and whites, deserves such a veto." What Nkomo may well be hesitant to test, however, is just how considerable that following is today.

We noted at the start some of the more alarmist scenarios depicted by the Times and others. Moscow vs. Pretoria, leading to global conflagration and all that. The first thing to be said about these scenarios is that nobody can prove them false in advance. The second thing is that saying something is likely can make even the most unlikely a little less unlikely. It is a very wrongheaded approach to dire possibilities in a fragile world. Instead of invoking worst-possible-case scenarios, Anglo-American efforts might better be directed at supplying assurances, if not guarantees, supportive of the Salisbury agreement. If Smith really turns out to be the sneaky fellow his enemies say he is, if the promised free elections are rigged, if that and the other thing, then it will be quite clear who has broken his word. Then blessings given can be withdrawn, and sanctions withdrawn can be reimposed. Then it will again be a quite new situation requiring quite new responses.

It is by no means certain, as some American and British spokesmen seem to assume, that the guerrilla struggle will continue and escalate regardless of what
happens in Zimbabwe. The hardest support for the Patriotic Front comes from the so-called frontline states—Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zambia. At least Botswana, Mozambique, and Zambia are severely hurting as a result of the present conflict. They border Rhodesia and the borders are closed. Their economies have fallen to the next level below a shambles, and a democratic humanist such as Zambia President Kenneth Kaunda can hardly be happy with what the ideological struggle and terror are doing to his beloved people.

As to massive Soviet and Cuban involvement, the picture is equally unclear. Is there any reason to believe that African leaders would welcome such intervention at the very heart of the continent and in a situation too confused for anyone to control the outside help? Of course the Cubans were very active in Angola, but that equivocally clear to the Soviet Union. The Russians confused for anyone to control the outside help? Of

salvation of seeing its governor general oversee the
don't want to cooperate with whites are really saying they are not able to cooperate with whites. But it requires whites who are ready to cooperate, and in Rhodesia of 1971 whites were not ready. Muzorewa added: “It is clearly understood in all the churches now that Africans owe no allegiance to this illegal government.” If or when the revolution comes, what will the church do? Muzorewa was straightforward and realistic: “The church, when the time comes, will do as the church usually does, enlist in the patriotic struggle.” He did not relish the consequences, but he accepted the fact: “The people are ready and change is imminent.”

That was seven years ago. Since then, Bishop Muzorewa has been in America several times, speaking to enthusiastic church groups and others about the injustices of Southern Africa. As Nkomo and other nationalists fought among themselves, Muzorewa quietly emerged as the unifying figure of nationalist aspirations. Now the bishop finds himself in an awkward position. He is accused of selling quietely emerged as the unifying figure of nationalist aspirations. Now the bishop finds himself in an awkward position. He is accused of selling

Bishop Abel Muzorewa is the man most observers believe the people of Zim- babwe would elect as their leader. Small in size, he is sometimes called “the little man,” but no one should underestimate this Methodist bishop’s fierce determination to protect the underdog and to protest injustice. Seven years ago I interviewed Bishop Muzorewa in Salisbury, and, in going over the notes from that interview today, I cannot help but be impressed by his

prescience. Muzorewa was not the major nationalist figure then. Nkomo was that, although Nkomo was in a detention camp at the time. Muzorewa had just recently run into serious trouble with the Smith regime and had been banned from the tribal trust lands where three-quarters of his flock lived.

“The church leaders here are severely com- promised,” he said. “They should have spoken out last year in order to force the whole question of land tenure and racism, or what I simply call land tenure racism.” (The Smith regime had recently implemented an apartheid-like division of white and black areas.) Did he expect major change in his lifetime? in the next five or ten years? “Oh yes, soon. Sooner than most people think…. There is no neat handle to bring about change, but you find the handle only by trying to make change.”

We talked about the revolutionary option. “Yes, it is probably necessary to keep that possibility in mind. Maybe it is a probability, but nobody should pray for it. Violence is a terrible thing…. It should not be necessary. We have two thousand African university graduates, enough to run a government. Some nations became independent when they had as few as ten graduates.”

The bishop talked about the need to build black confidence, and in that connection he thought the American black model was crucial. “We have to have the experiences that make it possible for us to say, ‘There and there. That’s what we are capable of doing.’” That confidence, he felt strongly, must be built in a multiracial society. He had no use for black separatism, no matter what banner it marched under. “Black separatism of any sort is a sign of despair.” People who say they do not want to cooperate with whites are really saying they are not able to cooperate with whites. But it requires whites who are ready to cooperate, and in Rhodesia of 1971 whites were not ready. Muzorewa added: “It is clearly understood in all the churches now that Africans owe no allegiance to this illegal government.” If or when the revolution comes, what will the church do? Muzorewa was straightforward and realistic: “The church, when the time comes, will do as the church usually does, enlist in the patriotic struggle.” He did not relish the consequences, but he accepted the fact: “The people are ready and change is imminent.”

That was seven years ago. Since then, Bishop Muzorewa has been in America several times, speaking to enthusiastic church groups and others about the injustices of Southern Africa. As Nkomo and other nationalists fought among themselves, Muzorewa quietly emerged as the unifying figure of nationalist aspirations. Now the bishop finds himself in an awkward position. He is accused of selling out because he believes he has found an alternative to open-ended violence. He is said to be a puppet because he rejects the dogma that governmental legitimacy must be properly blooded by revolutionary terror. In 1971 he denied the legitimacy of the Smith regime because it ruled by force and not by consent. Now a new government may be denied legitimacy because it rules by consent and not by force. Bishop Muzorewa and others will need all the help and understanding they can get on the hard road from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe.