

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dinner in South Africa

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Dear Peter,

"So, tell me, how do you feel about being in South Africa? Do you feel," he slid his hands down the sleeves of his gray suit jacket as if wiping off some slimy goo, "morally polluted?"

I was being introduced to Otto Krause, editor of an Afrikaans newspaper and spokesman for the ruling National Party. Kendal Price, our institute fellow in South Africa whom I was visiting, wanted me to meet a moderate Afrikaner. We had met for a drink in Krause's apartment and he had elicited my views of U.S. politics. We then went to a restaurant and all ordered bobotie, a traditional Afrikaner dish of ground meat, curry and custard. As we waited for the food, Krause fired his pointblank question.

I am not in the habit of telling people I don't like their country, but South Africa confronts a person with stark ethical alternatives. To lie or dissemble would have given me a queasy feeling of complicity in South Africa's racial policies. Besides, Krause's phrase was so apt. Morally polluted was exactly how I felt when I went to a movie theater or a restaurant and realized it was for whites only. It was like swimming in a river and belatedly seeing a drain pipe 100 yards upstream dripping raw sewage into it.

So I said yes, I felt morally polluted, and we crossed swords. Krause was a skilled debater and I didn't give him much of a contest. He sliced through me like a musketeer cutting up a platoon of the king's soldiers. His arguments were full of half-truths, distortions and contradictions, but I didn't know enough about South Africa to pierce them. Yet from that conversation I received a revelation. South Africa is a typical African country, riven by tribalism and still scarred by its experience with colonialism. The tribe in power is white and comprises about one-tenth of the population. The Boers, the Afrikaners' ancestors who settled this country, were similar in many ways to the black tribes they fought and defeated. Like the Matabele or the Zulu, the Boers were pastoral farmers, ready to move when they had exhausted the land they were on. They were proud of their cattle, their fighting skills and their society, and they despised those who were not members of it. The descendants, white and black, still are not all that different. Krause spoke like a fervid black nationalist, who was also a bigoted tribalist.

~~He spoke bitterly about the English, and used that term when~~

Bowden Quinn has completed a 31-month Overseas Journalism Fellowship from the Institute. He spent two years in West Africa and seven months in Southern and East Africa.

referring to the English-speaking white South Africans. The division between the Afrikaans- and English-speaking peoples remains marked, 72 years after they were supposedly united in one country. The English-speakers still control much of the business and industry in the country, but because of a lopsided electoral system that gives sparsely populated rural areas as much political clout as cities, the Afrikaners have a lock on the government. Krause was proud that his people had thrown off the colonial yoke, but he still chafed under the economic might the English descendants wielded. He could have been a disciple of Kwame Nkrumah, fulminating against neo-colonialism.

I thought he was being sophistic when he called South Africa a Third World country, but he actually undeceived me. South Africa's per-capita gross national product of US \$2,300 in 1980 was twice that of the Ivory Coast, but less than half of Ireland's. The World Bank places South Africa among Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Portugal and Romania on its annual scale of national economies. The term Third World means nothing if it includes countries as diverse as Cuba, Ghana, Honduras, India, Israel, South Africa, South Korea and Vietnam, all low- or middle-income countries on the World Bank's list. Looking at the bank's lists of other economic and social statistics, South Africa usually falls between the other African countries and the First World, if by that we mean the countries the bank groups under the title, "industrial market economies", with Ireland as the poorest. Certainly, though, the statistics show that South Africa is a developing country, or should be.

Krause said South Africa couldn't be expected to be as advanced as the Western countries socially since it was backwards economically. His defense of apartheid was that South Africa needed time to work out its problems. The U.S. was in no position to criticize, he added, when it had only started dealing with its racial problems 30 years ago, despite having the world's most advanced economy. Yet, Krause said he welcomed criticism from the West because it kept the Afrikaners strong and resolute in their beliefs, a distinct, God-fearing people, not grown weak and flabby (I was hearing between the lines) like you degenerate Americans, with your pornography, your crime and divorce rates, your inability to stand up to Communism and fight for your ideals. Afrikaners would fight for what they believed in.

Confused, I asked him if South Africa supported the ideals of the West, as he implied in the first part of his argument, or rejected them, as I inferred from the second part of his argument. He blew up and said South Africa didn't need to import its morality from anybody. I was surprised not so much by his answer as by the way he expressed it. He was not only angry but insulting, and, for me, the discussion ended there. I have since wondered why he was so abusive, just at that point, for he afterwards became conciliatory and claimed he had never been annoyed. The reason, I think, is that I had come close to revealing the soft spot in the Afrikaner stronghold.

The South African government looks to the West for support as an anti-communist, capitalistic, free, white, Western society faced with the onslaught of primitive, black, dictatorial communists. Let us examine these defenses.

South Africa is certainly not a free society. The police-state atmosphere was as thick as in any African country I've visi-

ted. Everywhere, I ran into the signs of a sinister official presence. I went to a resettlement camp on the Bophuthatswana border, where 44 black families refuse to accept South Africa's decision to deprive them of their land and so live in squalid limbo. When I arrived, I learned a black social worker interested in their plight had just been detained by the South African police. I talked with a black reporter in Johannesburg about it, and he was fearful of pursuing the story, though he is no coward. I visited the office of the New York Times reporter and found his office had been broken into over the weekend. Files on blacks had been thrown on the floor, apparently a reaction to the publication of two frontpage stories on South Africa in the Times the day before.

South Africa has a relatively free press, by African standards, but the Afrikaner government's attitude toward the press is the same as any other ruling African clique. It tries to muzzle it. The government prohibits the publication of material it might find embarrassing. It recently tightened the restrictions on the publication of the names of detainees. It wanted to pass an even more restrictive law that would have required licensing of journalists. The similarity between the proposed law and the UNESCO proposals for international certification of journalists, which have been condemned by the West and supported by Communist and repressive Third World governments, is striking. Only a public outcry, joined by the Afrikaans press, and the criticism of the Reagan administration, prevented passage of the South African government's bill.

Nor is South Africa a capitalist state, in the sense of having a free-enterprise economy. Government intervention in the economy is as heavy as in most African or Third World countries, no matter what ideology they profess. The government runs a rigid, planned economy for the benefit of the ruling group, as revealed in this passage from a publication of the Black Sash, a liberal, South African women's organization:

"The accession to power of the National Party in 1948 saw the beginning of a deliberate and concerted strategy to redistribute South Africa's wealth, firstly by breaking the stranglehold of foreign capital; and secondly by the intervention of the State in promoting business industrial enterprises which would recycle and channel South Africa's wealth where possible from main metropolitan areas to the new decentralized growth points....Given the monopoly of State power the National Party was in a position to promote Afrikaner business interests." (Marian Lacey, "The 'Resettlement Policy' in its historical context", South Africa—a land divided, A Black Sash Publication).

South Africa is, indeed, anti-communist, but will this save it? One of the lessons the U.S. may have learned in Iran is, if you can't make your friend the winner, make sure the winner is your friend. One of the first applications of this philosophy may have been in Africa, in a situation with parallels to South Africa. Liberia was ruled for 120 years by Americo-Liberians, descendants of American slaves with no more links to, nor consideration for, the native blacks than have the Afrikaners for black South Africans. The U.S. supported the Americo-Liberian regime, which concentrated all economic and political power in the hands of a minority group that comprised only 5 percent of the population. When the revolution came, however, the U.S. had no trouble making friends with the new rulers. Before the coup, the U.S. was spen-

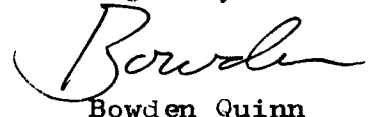
ding about \$8 million a year to support the government; when Sgt. Doe came to power, the annual contribution went up to about \$65 million. The U.S. appears prepared to do the same in Zaire, another African country with parallels to South Africa because of its abundance of so-called strategic minerals. The U.S. criticizes the nauseatingly corrupt regime of Mobutu Sese Seko, but continues its economic and military support of his government. The Reagan administration says a change in government is an internal affair. Rather than end up with an African Ayatollah in Zaire, though, the U.S. will probably ditch Mobutu as soon as it thinks he is doomed, and find another person to support who will retain the country's links with the West.

Could the same scenario apply to South Africa? Not if the conflict is a matter of the preservation of a Western society. Mobutu wears his Africaness on his sleeve, and on his head in the form of a leopard skin cap. Seeing Afrikaners in business suits getting toppled would be harder for the American government to accept. Yet appearances may be deceiving. The Afrikaners call themselves a Christian people, but their two churches were just kicked out of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches because of their support of the government's racist policies. The Dutch and French peasants who became the Boers arrived in South Africa in the 1600s and 1700s. They missed the social and philosophical developments that accompanied the transition of Western civilization from mercantile monarchies to industrial democracies. All Western nations have accepted the equality of man as a fundamental truth that supports the legitimacy of their existence, no matter how imperfectly their governments or their citizens live up to that belief. By believing that blacks are inferior to whites, Afrikaners have set themselves apart from Western civilization.

So if South Africa under its present government is not free, nor capitalist, nor an outpost of Western civilization, and if, in the pragmatic world of geopolitics, simple anti-communism is a naive defense, where does that leave Krause and his fellow Afrikaner ideologues? If civil war comes, would the TV pictures of blacks killing whites bring the U.S. to the side of the Afrikaners? Or would the American public view it as just another bloody tribal conflict in Africa, and want not to get involved? The revolution is not so imminent that Krause might stay awake nights worrying about that question, but it could spoil his digestion occasionally.

With this newsletter, I conclude my fellowship. I am grateful to the trustees and members of the Institute for the opportunity to come to Africa and for the wonderful experiences I have had here over the past 31 months. I thank you, Peter, and the Institute staff, especially Administrative Assistant Louise Cunningham, for all your help and support. I have more questions about Africa now than when I began the fellowship. I am remaining in Harare as a freelance journalist to try to find a few more answers, and loads more questions. I am more intrigued by Africa than ever. For all its problems, it is not a hopeless case. It is the newest and the oldest place in mankind's history, and should not be ignored.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn