

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DH - 1
On The Eve

September 27, 1961
B.P. 49
Dakar, Senegal

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The SS. Lyautey arrives at Dakar tomorrow. For the past three months I've been preparing for this venture: reading about Africa; talking to Africans and Africanists in the United States, Britain and France; chatting with Africans and Frenchmen on the ship; and trying to define to my own satisfaction what an American journalist should be studying in Africa. Here are some notes on that period of preparation which, in a sense, ends tomorrow morning.

+ + +

In New York, a lovely African woman said that Africa seems to have few architectural or written monuments in its past. "Maybe we really are stupider than the others," she said wistfully. I asked if writing and buildings were the only criteria of civilization; she said yes. She seemed to have accepted the white view that African culture should be measured with a European yardstick. Is this because her father was French and she was educated in France? Or is the attitude common among Africans?

A handful of scholars is beginning the important work of putting the history of Africa in a more accurate perspective. Equally important are the new myths that the Africans will create about their past. Textbook history - popular history - is largely wishful thinking; one can learn a lot about a nation's ideals from its official version of the past.

+ + +

The wisecrack in academic circles is that in order to be an expert on a country you have to have flown over it in daylight. For Africa, they seem to use jets. Take, for example, the American "Africanist" - he lectures on the subject - who told me that the best place to study French-speaking Africa is Paris (a nice idea, though, isn't it?) and who gave me a list of local experts to see in Africa. None of these experts was African; each was white; each was American; each was a United States government official. Or take the reporters (academics

as well as journalists) who hop from capital to capital seeking instant wisdom from the Embassy, the local CIA man, Old Africa Hands among the remaining Europeans around the hotel bar - in a word, from anyone except the men who are shaping the political destiny of Africa. There is nothing wrong with these "sources" in themselves: but what self-respecting newsmen would go to, say, Senator Russell of Georgia to find out what Martin Luther King is thinking?

+

+

+

The high point of our few days in Britain was a visit to that patron saint of Africanists, Thomas Hodgkin of Oxford. I followed a well-worn path to his rambling house outside Oxford on the road to Stratford. As he has to so many others, Hodgkin gave generously of his time and ideas, and tea besides. His thinking, of which I am an unabashed admirer, has been the greatest influence so far on my own approach to Africa.

Hodgkin is a healthy corrective to the easy experts. While writers such as Mrs. Elspeth Huxley explain Africa in great and authoritative detail, Hodgkin insists on the inability of Westerners in general to understand fully what is happening today in African politics. He decries the smug eagerness of Westerners to tell Africans how to run their countries in a properly Western way - what Jaja Wa chuku of Nigeria sardonically calls "intellectual imperialism". If the West has an intellectual contribution to make, Hodgkin argues, it is likely to be mainly in the field of African history and archeology (because of the shortage of African scholars).

+

+

+

In an African student's room in Paris, the political ikons you will almost always find on the wall are photographs of Patrice Lumumba and Fidel Castro. Why Castro? "Castro's struggle against American domination is like our own struggle against French domination."

An African student on the Place St. Michel tells me that the present leaders of Africa are without exception fools or rascals and that his generation will sweep them all out within a few years. He says: "All whites who go to Africa write _____ (unprintable)". He alternates bursts of hatred against whites with bursts of enthusiasm about our going to his country. He is 23 years old.

In the sedate newspaper offices of Le Monde, a French journalist picks up the student's thread of thought. Philippe Decraene, who writes on Africa, believes with the student that the present African leaders are transition men who will soon be superseded by

men who grew up under circumstances quite different from those of their parents. Neither Decraene nor anyone else I spoke to seemed to have any clear idea of what this new generation will do when it comes to power.

+ + +

French popular attitudes on Africa and Africans follow the standard cliches, at least in my experience. You say you're going to Africa. Within a couple of sentences comes a remark in almost exactly these words: "Africans are like children, but they're not mean." (After a while you begin to long for someone to tell you that Africans are like nasty old men.) Next there usually comes the question: "What do you think about your race problem in the United States?" Sometimes this is openly tit-for-tat, as in the case of Frenchman who said: "We're sick and tired of Americans criticizing us about Algeria and colonialism when you can't solve your own problems."

The French seem baffled by American discrimination, but not because of standard hypocritical views on race prejudice. They say they have nothing against "les noirs", but that they feel about the Algerians in France the way Americans feel about Negroes. This is by no means an accurate analogy, since the Algerians in France are not subject to anything like American segregation.

+ + +

The ship made an unscheduled stop at Oran to drop off some two hundred soldiers for the Algerian war. It was a dreary scene when they got off. ICI LA FRANCE was carved on the stone mole of Oran, but on board the passengers were limp with boredom over Algeria. There was none of the festivity that usually accompanies the sending of young men to be killed. No bands played, no one sang or cheered. The soldiers waited for their trucks in the hot sun. They were silent; the passengers watched silently from the deck. And indeed what was there for anyone to say?

+ + +

The five-day trip on the Lyautey (a 10,000-ton freighter that carries some four hundred passengers) was an invaluable experience. This is the season when everyone who can afford to escape the humid heat of summer returns to Dakar from France. About half the passengers were Africans; half were "petits blancs", Frenchmen holding small jobs in Africa. Under the artificial conditions of shipboard living, we were able to get acquainted faster than on shore. We learned something about African social patterns; perhaps we will be less likely to come down with foot-in-mouth disease on shore.

Somewhere early in the conversation with Africans a test question often comes along. Usually it has been: "What do you think about Fidel Castro?" or, less directly: "I'm very interested in Cuba." If you do not yell "Charge!" for the Bay of Pigs, the conversation can then get down to business. Sometimes the test question will be about Algeria or the Congo (especially Katanga), but - interestingly enough - never yet have I been asked about race relations in the United States.

The Senegalese have been surprisingly frank about the internal politics of their country. The half-dozen with whom I've talked are a tiny sample, and certainly no cross-section, but they are all well-placed under the present government (or they wouldn't have gotten that trip to France). Yet half of them have attacked that government in pretty strong terms, and no one has gone out of his way to praise it.

Some of this is the standard small change of griping about officials eating high on the hog, but most of it isn't. Above all, they object to the continued French presence in Senegal. "You call this independence?" and "We need foreign doctors and engineers, but not a lot of overpaid secretaries" and "Prices are exorbitant in Dakar because it's a protected market for the French" and "French aid goes to sending Frenchmen home on vacation - first class". Some say that Senegal comes out the loser in its economic relations with France, despite French aid. I would like to see a good non-official study of the balance-sheet of those economic relations.

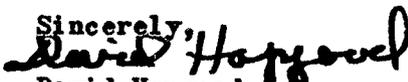
+ + +

You sense that the French in Dakar feel they are living on borrowed time - though when they think time will be up varies. A military type says: "They'll need us for the next hundred years." A woman working for the Senegalese government says to an African: "You're going to throw us all out soon." The African shakes his head and shrugs. They both smile politely; they seem to understand each other.

These borrowed years are fat for the French. They live on a much higher standard of living than they would if they were doing the same job in France, and they are the first to say it. A factory foreman saves \$100 a month in Dakar. He expects to be replaced by an African one of these days; meanwhile, he says, he never had it so good.

+ + +

Now, the day before landing, I feel I've accumulated a suitcase full of unanswered questions, some of which I've tried to suggest in this first newsletter. I'll be grateful for any comment, criticism or additions from the readers of these letters.

Sincerely,

 David Hapgood