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The French Presence

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Dakar, Senegal

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Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The city of Dakar is a giant symbol of what Europe has done to Africa, for better or for worse. It is a big, booming city with a skyline as beautiful and unreal as New York's, and traffic jams worthy of any city its size. The population has almost reached 400,000 and is growing by ten percent a year. These are some of the symbols of Europe's three centuries in West Africa:

In the harbor of Dakar lies the tiny island of Goree, a melancholy and gracious reminder of the business that dominated relations between Europe and Black Africa from the 1500's to the 19th Century. Goree was a warehouse for the slave trade: slaves bought further down the coast were kept on the island (sharks discouraged attempts to swim home) till the ship came to take them on the Middle Passage to America. The visitor can still see a "maison des esclaves", where the captives were chained in narrow, corridor-like cells that butt out on the ocean. Now Goree is quiet and half-deserted. There are no cars, and the old houses are crumbling away. Today Goree is history.

In town there is a statue, erected in 1923, that commemorates West Africa's contribution of blood to World War I. It shows two soldiers, one French and one African. If you look at it from the right angle, as a Senegalese will sardonically point out, the French seems to be urging the African into the trenches. In two world wars and many colonial battles, Africans were recruited to fight for France; and the statue stands today as a symbol of the Africans' resentment at dying in wars they never made. This, too, is history.

Outside the city, on a spectacularly beautiful cliff over the Atlantic, is the University of Dakar. The university was built by the French over the last five years, at a time when they already knew they were soon to leave. It is still expanding, and France still supplies most of the money and almost all the staff. The university, and the excellent school system of Dakar, are symbols of the most durable element

in French imperialism: the instillation of French culture. The French Presence is ebbing elsewhere in Senegalese society, but not in education. It seems fair to guess that they will be at the university and the school long after they are out of the government and the economy. (The Senegalese have also come down with what appears to be a bad case of French academic snobbery. Time and again one hears Senegalese equate the ability to run a political system with the holding of a proper university degree.)

Beyond the solid tropical-modern buildings of downtown Dakar lies the shantytown of the Medina: acre after acre of shacks made of scraps of wood and flattened oil drums. The Medina is inhabited mainly by the thousands who have been attracted to Dakar since World War II by reports of high wages or simply by the lure of the city. Most are Senegalese who have fled the harsh unyielding bush, but there are thousands from Guinea, Gambia and Mauretania. (The light-skinned Mauretians really stand out in Dakar: every other one looks as if he should be playing the title role in "King of Kings".) The hovels of the Medina are shrines in the religion of industrialization, a religion which Africa has adopted from Europe.

In a sense - though this may seem a bit strained - the Senegalese Government's slum clearance efforts symbolize a sensitivity that doubtless results from generations of colonial rule. The government talks a lot about slum clearance, and quite often one notices that a whole block of the Medina has been razed in a day. But there is a distinctly Potemkin flavor to much of this work. For the dismantled shacks and their inhabitants are carted off to another shantytown; there the people again set up their shacks, still out of work and now out of town. The slums that are torn down are on the big avenues, where they are in full view. The new shantytowns are behind high walls or in valleys where the passerby does not notice them. The sensitivity to outside criticism that produces this sort of slum clearance was expressed by the local paper when it reported the clearing of a block on one of the main avenues: "Perhaps this will prevent visitors to our city from commenting, as some of them have, on our slums." (That particular block was cleared just in time for Queen Elizabeth to use that avenue during her brief visit here today.) Much of the new construction that replaces the shanties is public buildings in a city that already has more than its share of grandiose public buildings.

What first strikes the newcomer's eye is that the French Presence here is still massive, that Dakar still has the look of a French city. A year and a half after independence, there are 40,000 Europeans here, as many as there have ever been. The Africans tell you that the French population is increasing; the French usually say they are leaving in droves. The French consul, who is taking a census, says the number has not changed since independence. The expensive villas that oc-

cupy the best locations along the ocean (except those that the military got first) are almost all owned by whites. The midtown streets are crowded with Africans; but the houses and stores lining the streets belong either to the French or to the Syrians and Lebanese, economic fellow-travelers of the French who immigrated when their countries came under French rule after World War I. There are restaurants, cafes and shops where you hardly ever see an African.

Commerce in Dakar is controlled by a handful of octopus-like French trading companies with names like CFAO, NOSOCO, and SCOA. They deal in just about everything. For example, CFAO (Compagnie Francaise de l'Afrique Occidentale) has 19 places of business in its own name, and is said to hold an interest in others. CFAO will: sell you a piece of land, build a house on it with their own building materials, sell you furniture; shoes, clothing, yardgoods and a sewing machine; a Ford, and auto insurance, repairs and gasoline; food (wholesale or retail); luggage, watches, insecticides, beer and musical instruments. If you need an Otis elevator, CFAO sells them too. The oligopolies sell French goods at about twice the French price; the prices they charge for imported foods (which includes many staples) would make S.S. Pierce blush. Little or no duty is paid on most of these goods, and the cost of transport is not that great. Accordingly, the big trading companies are said to return profits of 20 to 30 percent a year. The profits are remitted to France, since Senegal does not control movements of capital between the two countries.

Senegal is a more protected market for French goods than is France itself. In 1959, France dropped many of its restrictions on international trade, opening up the domestic market to more foreign competition. Those measures were not extended to French Africa, and they do not apply to Senegal today. The French Treasury holds Senegal's foreign exchange; if CFAO or NOSOCO sells it, even at twice the price, you are not likely to get a license to buy it from Japan. This protected market is the price Senegal pays in return for the French subsidy on Senegalese peanuts (a point that is rarely made in foreign comments on the Senegalese economy). Senegal pays in the exorbitant cost of its imports, and in straight subsidies as well. French wheat, for example, is bought at a price fixed above the world market rate. The wheat agreement has just been extended for another five years. It is very hard to draw up a balance sheet on trade between Senegal and France. The opinion among economists I have consulted here is that Senegal on the whole loses out on trade with France.

Opponents of the government on the left then go on to say that Senegal loses out in its overall economic relations with France. This opinion does not seem to stand up.

France also provides Senegal with aid in the form of direct grants, loans, personnel, support for the university. In 1961 French aid amounted to between \$15 and \$20 million. (A fair estimate: no one quite agrees on the total; there is quite a bit of juggling of the figures.) The French supply technical assistance personnel at the request of the Senegalese. At present there are about 1,300 of them, compared to 1,650 a year ago. Almost 600 are professors and teachers; less than 150 are in the administration. Senegal pays a flat rate of just under \$100 a month per person. France pays the rest of their salaries and their transportation.

The overall "aid" figures must of course be taken skeptically. Grants are "tied": they must be spent on French goods and French contractors. This means Senegal does not get a franc's worth for each franc spent. In colonial days it could be doubted whether all the French officials on the payroll were necessary; the bureaucracy was more padded than most and they were overpaid by French metropolitan standards. But this criticism is becoming irrelevant as the French are steadily being eliminated from administrative and clerical jobs. By now most of them are in technical jobs where they are clearly useful. In secondary and higher education, they are irreplaceable, at least in the short run. (In Guinea, Russians teach trigonometry through interpreters. The United States, a visiting official suggested recently, could supply Senegal with French-speaking teachers from Louisiana. Neither of these alternatives seems particularly attractive.) In any case, those who are overpaid, are overpaid by France, not Senegal. "Aid" includes long summer vacations in France - but France pays, not Senegal. Thus, no matter how one discounts the total, what is left is a net benefit to Senegal.

On the more personal level of race relations, the French Presence in Dakar makes a dreary impression. Stock types from colonial literature come to life before your eyes: the sloppy-drunk foreman boasting of his ability to "handle" Africans; the hotel owner, here for 30 years and gone to seed, reminiscing of the good old days and explaining that he likes his African employes - "in their place" - but he will not tolerate this talk about a union; the garage operator savagely bawling out an ineffectual mechanic but (it seems quite obvious) not really wanting the African to learn how to handle the wrench. The old colonial cliches seem after all to be true. There is an air of messy self-indulgence about the Europeans here that is in vivid contrast to the ordered self-discipline of France. The "petit blanc" of Dakar, and many of the Frenchmen in government, seem to be here only partly for the money; there is also the "psychic income" of feeling themselves superior to most of the human beings around them. Marseilles was never like this! France-in-Africa wears a far different face from France itself. Senegalese who have been to France will tell you of their pleasant surprise at not suffering in Paris the discrimination they experience in Dakar.

You can, to some degree, date the Frenchmen you meet by their attitudes. The newcomers seem to be free of most of the stigmata of colonialism. Recteur (President) Franck of the university, who came a year ago, mocks the pretensions of the little world of French Dakar and asks the American visitor if he was not shocked by the racism he found here.

The visitor can only answer, rather lamely, that on this subject Americans are hard to shock. The standard of comparison I have used is that of France, not the United States. The lines of race discrimination in Dakar today (and, by all accounts, before independence) are not nearly as rigid as they are in, say, Princeton, New Jersey, let alone Princeton, Georgia. The French did not maintain segregated schools for their children, and housing was never segregated on the American pattern. (Obviously there was, and is, segregation by income.) Discrimination was by culture, rather than race. Educated Africans were always accepted to some degree by the French (as compared to the British and certainly the Americans). In any case, what one finds is mainly talk, and talk about race is freer here than in the United States.

Listening to the Africans and the French talk about the French Presence is like looking through the two ends of a telescope. Not long ago I went to see a young Senegalese who has just replaced a Frenchman as "directeur de finances" in the Ministry of Finance; the Frenchman is still there as an adviser. When I met him on the ship, the Senegalese was impatient with Africans who keep on talking about colonialism. He was not in his office that day; the Frenchman was there, and we chatted in the hall. He is 55 years old and has been in colonial administration for 30 years. This is what he had to say:

"We're all getting out of here, as soon as our contracts run out. Oh, they want us to stay, but we won't." Why? "We can't take it, that's why. Our relations are fine, but we can't work together. We have different ways of doing things. I have a good job waiting for me in Paris. I'm through with this place."

The Frenchman was bitter enough to talk to a stranger of whom he knew only that he was white and that he had come to see his new African boss. The next day the Senegalese was there. He sat at a huge desk, the Frenchman at a smaller desk next to it. The Frenchman got up quickly and left the office. The Senegalese looked after him and shrugged. He said:

"We just can't get along. Some times he tries to sabotage me, to make things go wrong. I know he's an older man, but some day I'm going to have to go to the minister and get rid of him." Aren't they leaving anyway? "Leaving? You push them out one door and they come in the next. You just can't get them out. Would you want to go back to France and be a little man at lower pay, after being a big man here for all these years? Fourteen of them in this ministry alone!"

This conversation is repeated endlessly, in one form or another, in Dakar today. Opponents of the government complain constantly about the slow pace of "Africanization". But it is an issue that is rapidly becoming history. For the French Presence is on its way out, at a rate that would seem rapid anywhere but here. The number of Frenchmen may stay constant, but their power diminishes every week. The peanut subsidy will disappear in a year or so, under the rules of the European Common Market; the French commercial monopolies will probably go with it. CFAO and Co. still run trade in Dakar, but they and the Lebanese have abandoned the interior in the past year. The Senegalese government holds an interest in the new industrial firms that are going into business here, and new trade regulations are reducing the nation's dependence on imports. Almost every week some new measure of Africanization is celebrated in the press. This fall all French chiefs of government departments were replaced by Africans. Every negotiation with France produces a step, however small, toward complete independence. There is still a long way to go, and the French may be here a long time, particularly in education. But under the froth of "neocolonialism", the political issues of the future are gradually taking shape.



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