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Nationalists Choose
a Prime Minister

c/o J. M. Pennington
5, Elm Street
Houghton, Johannesburg
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue,
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The crowd was quiet outside the dingy old Raadsaal building in Pretoria where the Nationalist Parliamentary caucus was meeting to choose a new leader. A few gay fellows were flirting in Afrikaans with typists and stenographers who were leaning out the windows. The new Time-Life man was trying, with little success, to interview a toothless old man waving a Vierkleur, the flag of the old Transvaal Republic. Edward R. Murrow's CBS cameraman was looking very professional, adjusting his earphones and twirling the turret of lenses on his mammoth machine as he focused on the door where the announcement would be made. It wasn't a big crowd--about 400 people--and except for the talk of the

newsmen and photographers the snatches of conversation I heard were exclusively in Afrikaans. The two names in everyone's mind and on everyone's lips were Havenga and Strydom.

Both men had announced that they were available as candidates. Everyone expected that Strydom (pronounced Stray-dom) would win the voting hands down but no one ruled out a last-minute move by Dr. Malan to help the cause of Havenga or a bout of clever political manoeuvring in the caucus room.

There was no shouting, no cheering--just the noise of cars passing at the end of the sealed-off block and the occasional curse of a cameraman as a woman raised her parasol in front of his lens. A pride of newspapermen were gathered in front of the door, grousing



about having to stand in the street.

No outsiders had been permitted to attend the meeting and the chief Nationalist Party Whip, J. J. Serfontein, had stood at the door of the converted tea room, carefully checking the credentials of the Nat M.P.'s as they filed in. At 10 a.m. he had locked the door, checking a piece of brown paper which was pasted over the only clear glass window at eye level. A member of the Special Branch of the C.I.D. was posted outside as guard. From time to time bursts of applause came from a row of open windows on the second floor, but we in the street had no idea of what was going on until, at 11:20 a.m., we heard the strains of Psalm 134* being sung by the caucus in Afrikaans. A decision had been reached.

At about 11:35, Serfontein appeared at the door of the Raadsaal and announced that Strydom had been chosen without the formality of an election. After a short burst of cheering the crowd stood with bared heads and sang, first Psalm 134 and then the Afrikaans folksong, Vrye Volk (Free People). Then the murmur, "Dis die Leeu, Dis die Leeu" ("It's the Lion, It's the Lion") ran through the people in the street as Strydom, known also as "The Lion of the Waterberg," appeared in the doorway. He stood for a minute, a short, powerfully-built, grim-looking man, then two or three of his supporters hoisted him to their shoulders.

A cheer went up but Strydom refused to smile. His lips were set in a hard line and his eyes stared intently at the crowd. He went so far as to wave his hat with his right hand. In the other he clutched a sheaf of papers he had carried with him from the caucus room. The cheering, killed by the look on Strydom's face, faded away and the men holding him aloft set him on his feet in an almost embarrassed silence.

Then Serfontein outlined to the press just what had gone on in the caucus meeting. Strydom had been nominated, he said, by Mr. S. P. Le Roux, Minister of Agriculture, and seconded by Mr. H. Kloppers, M.P. Havenga had been nominated by Capt. G. H. F. Strydom, M.P. for Aliwal, and seconded by Mr. Jan Viljoen, Minister of Mines and Education. At this stage Havenga had announced he wished to make a statement. He said: "In view of the prevailing feeling and for the sake of unity to which I have contributed so much myself, I have decided not to take part in a formal test of strength in connection with the national leadership, and I therefore ask my proposer and seconder to withdraw my nomination."

Strydom, said Serfontein, was thereupon elected unanimously, without a ballot.

Serfontein then told the crowd that, after the election, Havenga had risen to say the following: "I wish Mr. Strydom luck with his election and hope that he will succeed in maintaining unity. The caucus, to whom an appeal was made in the name of democracy, has decided, and I accept the decision. Whether the people outside also think thus, I do not know.

"This brings me personally to the end of a long public career, a long period of service to my people in war and peace. Regarding the value of this, history will in time decide.

*A hymn which is usually sung in South Africa to a man who has embarked on an important job. In English it goes, "Behold, bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and bless the Lord . . ."

"The last official duty that I now must still fulfill, is this afternoon, on instructions from the Prime Minister, to deliver his resignation personally to His Excellency the Governor-General.

"I have only one more request, and that is, before I leave this hall, that my colleagues who desire it will step forward to give me the opportunity of giving them a farewell handshake."

The crowd cheered again when they heard this and Strydom, turning around, asked someone behind him to say a few words. It was Havenga, standing in the deep shadows of the doorway, looking pale, old and ill. He shook his head, then turned and ducked into the building. (A friend, who was guarding another exit with a Time-Life camera, said that Havenga came out a few minutes later, still looking weak and being supported by two men.)

Serfontein then went on to read the names of the men in the caucus who had made speeches congratulating Strydom and praising Havenga. After another long cheer Strydom followed Havenga's example and disappeared into the building. It was all over. Havenga and Malan had lowered their flag without firing a shot and a new era in South African government had begun. Johannes Gerhardus Strydom was the new Prime Minister.

What sort of man is Strydom? The bare bones of his life reveal a little. He was born at Willowmore, in the Cape Province, on July 14, 1893, and received his early education there at Franschoek and the old Victoria College, now Stellenbosch University. He then became an ostrich farmer near Outdshoorn, but gave up farming in 1914 when the ostrich industry collapsed.

From Outdshoorn he went to Pretoria where he joined the civil service and obtained his B.A. and LL.B. at Afrikaans-medium Pretoria University. In 1917 he became captain of the Pretoria Rugby Football Club but moved, the following year, to Nylstroom to practice as an attorney and enter politics. From 1918 until 1929 he was secretary of the Waterberg Branch of the Nationalist Party. In 1929 he was elected to Parliament from Waterberg and has represented that constituency ever since. In 1936 he was named head of the Nationalist Party in the Transvaal--and, of course, on November 30, 1954, he became Prime Minister.

What does he believe? He believes in Afrikaner Nationalism. He does not believe in compromise. He does not believe in the Malan policy of "wait and see." He believes in apartheid, applied firmly. He believes that Parliament is supreme--that no court, including the Supreme Court, should have the power to pass on the constitutionality of a measure passed by Parliament. He believes that South Africa must become a Republic, preferably outside the British Commonwealth.

To illustrate the last of these beliefs, he said, in 1939, "I would rather disappear from public life than abandon the republican aim of our party." He made the statement when Malan, leader of the Nationalists, was trying to gain a majority in Parliament by joining forces with the Afrikaner Party of Havenga and General Hertzog. He went on to say that Hertzog and Havenga (to their everlasting discredit) would not associate themselves with a political party that wanted a republic--they were too much pro-British.

After India's decision to become a Republic inside the Commonwealth, Strydom took part in Nationalist Party discussions on whether South Africa should become a republic within or without the Commonwealth. Said he: "South Africa should be separate from the British Empire and Crown."

He was opposed to South Africa's participation in World War II against the Germans. Once, when Smuts returned from Britain, Strydom asked: "Why the celebrations?" All that had been done, he pointed out, was to place a "kaffir captain" (Haile Selassie) on his throne and to endanger western civilization by making Russia a power in Europe.

Strydom was asked to write a short autobiography when the Nationalists came to power in 1948. He wrote: "When fusion between General Hertzog and General Smuts took place in 1934, I was the only Transvaal member of Parliament who stood out, and, with a minority of the Party's members, decided to keep the Party alive. In 1938, with the general election, I was the only National Party candidate elected in the Transvaal. . ."

Obviously, he is proud of his steadiness of purpose--he would move heaven and earth to keep his Party "pure." His tightly pressed lips, his steadiness of gaze, his unbending rigidity and his strictly regimented appearance are not poses. He is an uncomplex, straightforward politician--no one could ever claim not to know what he stands for.

How did he become Prime Minister? If Malan had had his way, the Premiership would have fallen to Havenga, the able Minister of Finance. Up to a point Malan played his cards carefully. The story, as told by Otto Schweltnus (editor of *Dagbreek en Sondagnuus*, Johannesburg Sunday Afrikaans-language newspaper in which Strydom has a controlling interest; PBM-25), began last June when Havenga went to Malan to say that he was tired and wanted to retire. Malan pleaded with Havenga not to resign--and revealed that he himself would be retiring in October and would like Havenga to stay behind to keep an eye on things.

Havenga left Groot Schuur, the Prime Minister's Cape Town residence, with a spoken or unspoken assurance that he would become the next Prime Minister. He did not resign.

There are several probable reasons for Malan's wish that Havenga succeed him as Prime Minister. For one thing, Havenga has a reputation for avoiding extremism which has made him popular with both English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans. As Prime Minister he could have provided an inner solidarity with which to face the world when some of the more illiberal measures of apartheid were the subject of overseas furor.

For another, Havenga has proved his genius for administration in his handling of the Finance portfolio since 1924. He has gained world-wide respect for South African finance when other phases of South African administration have been held in grim suspicion.

For another, Malan must have felt he owed Havenga a few years of glory. Havenga was the man who enabled Malan to form a government in 1948. Without the nine seats of Havenga's Afrikaner Party, Malan could never have claimed a majority.

Another reason is the lack of love lost between Strydom and Malan. The two have been at loggerheads ever since Malan and Havenga accepted the ruling of the South African Supreme Court that the bill placing Colored voters on a separate roll was unconstitutional.

Malan must have realized that he could not keep Strydom out forever. He apparently felt, however, that the effects of Strydom might be softened by an interim period of Havenga's middle-of-the-roadism.

Havenga kept Malan's retirement secret well. Everyone knew that Malan would be retiring soon--after all, he was 80--but no one knew when. Malan realized there was considerable support for Strydom among the Transvaal and Orange Free State Members of Parliament and he feared that if he made the announcement of his retirement at the wrong time, Strydom might be able to organize that support and grab the Prime Ministership.

Significantly, Malan waited to announce his proposed retirement until October 11, the day before Strydom was scheduled to leave on a trip to Europe. At an ordinary cabinet meeting he dropped his bombshell--and the next day Strydom stepped onto an airplane, leaving Havenga a clear field. The word got around that Strydom, before he left, had announced he was not a candidate for the Premiership.

For a few weeks there was no question that Havenga would be the next Prime Minister. It seemed, as I said in PBM-30, that it would be one of the most uneventful changes of Prime Minister in the history of the Union of South Africa.

Then things began to happen. Strydom, in Europe, heard that he was being counted out of the running. He sent a quick letter to his chief lieutenant, Dr. H. F. Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs. The exact contents of the letter are not known, but in effect it said: "Am very much in the running--start the bandwagon."

And Verwoerd started the bandwagon. His job wasn't particularly hard. Strydom commanded a great deal of respect among his fellow Transvaal Nationalists and among more extreme elements in the Orange Free State who had never cared much for the caution of Malan and Havenga. Before long, Verwoerd had more than enough votes lined up to give Strydom the job. He informed Strydom of this--then sat back and began to map out his plan of attack as Minister of Native Affairs under a strictly apartheid-minded Prime Minister.

Havenga heard of this development--and again decided it was time to retire. At the November 10 meeting of the Cabinet in Pretoria he walked into the room with his resignation tucked underneath his arm. At the last minute, however, a telegram reached him from Dr. Malan asking him to hold on a few more weeks. Havenga postponed his retirement a second time.

Malan had left Pretoria, he had said after announcing his retirement plans, for good. He would not even return to hand in his letter of resignation to the Governor-General. This, however, was before the Strydom-Verwoerd exchange of letters and Havenga's second decision to retire. As soon as he heard of these moves he decided to return to Pretoria. In his private plane he flew north to face the regular November 18 Cabinet meeting. He told them, I'm sure, that Havenga was his choice--and for the sake of Party unity they must see to it that he was chosen as

Prime Minister. It was significant that neither C. R. Swart, Minister of Justice, or Eric Louw, Minister of Economic Affairs, two of the leaders in the Strydom campaign, bothered to show up at the Cabinet meeting.

It was then that Malan must have discovered just how much influence he had lost. He had become just another grand old man in the Nationalist Party--a great fellow in his day, but now rather out-of-date. The Cabinet Ministers were ready to respect him as a relic of the past, but they weren't prepared to cater to his nomination of Havenga as Prime Minister. He left Pretoria that night, a disillusioned, tired old man, not to return.

Everyone waited nervously for Strydom to arrive back in the Union on the 26th



of November. When he arrived, he made no comment on his candidacy. But after talking to his supporters, he realized that the job was his for the taking--and he decided to take instead of waiting around a few years for Havenga to finish out his career. Three days before the caucus meeting he announced he was willing to accept the Premiership if the caucus was prepared to give it to him. Havenga made a similar statement a day or two later, but there was never any doubt and Havenga should have known it.

Apparently he did, for on the day of the caucus meeting he didn't even force the issue to a vote.

The defeat of Havenga and Malan marks a turning point in South African politics. Havenga was the last candidate for Prime Minister who shared the Boer War experience and the moderate views of Smuts, Hertzog and Botha. He was the last candidate whose background was the Cape Province with its tradition of semi-liberalism. He was the last candidate who might balk at leaving the Commonwealth; who stood in favor with English-speaking people; who was willing to go slowly with racial

legislation. It has been pointed out to him that he is considered a political antique whose usefulness came to an end when the six new Parliamentary seats from Southwest Africa were taken by Nationalist Party candidates, enabling the Nats to claim a majority in Parliament without the support of Havenga's nine Afrikaner Party seats.

One of the points of widest disagreement between Havenga and Strydom is the issue of the Cape Colored voters. Something of Strydom's underlying political creed is revealed in his complete rejection of a man like Havenga who said, regarding the Colored vote, "We will not serve the national interests of the whites, if in our zeal and impatience to find an early solution of certain aspects of our color problem, we depart from the old national Hertzog road without due regard to the express will of the people." Later he added, "With world opinion against us, it is not wise or practical at the present stage to take away any of the rights which have been given to the non-European."

It is plain that Strydom has gone farther than the mere rejection of the Cape Branch of the Nationalists. He has rejected its policies flatly, as much as saying, "if you're going to continue to be so damned cautious and lily-white you don't deserve to play on our team."

Strydom represents the hard, bitter, traditionally isolated Transvaal. He stands for strict apartheid, hard republicanism, vigorous support of Afrikaner culture, absolute sovereignty of Parliament and the inflexible, Bible-bound spirit of the old Boers. With him a question is black and white. There is no grey. He will be forced to mend his ways if he is to prevent the Nationalist Party from splitting into northern (Transvaal-Free State) and southern (Cape) factions. There has been no indication so far that he is willing and/or able to do so.

What is Strydom likely to do with his new-found power? One of the first things he must do is establish the sovereignty of Parliament, probably by passing an Act of Parliament which will make it illegal for the Supreme Court to decide, or give opinions on, Acts of Parliament in general. By so doing, he will be removing the last check on the power of the legislature. In effect, it will give Strydom and his cohorts complete power--at least until a general election rolls around.

After the authority of Parliament is definitely established, he will proceed to carry out his program--removal of Coloreds from the voters' roll, industrialization of the Reserves, stricter control over African movement--all the facets of apartheid which have always seemed theoretical and impractical may suddenly come into being under Strydom. In addition, he can be depended upon to press for the annexation of the British Protectorates (Swaziland, Basutoland, Bechuanaland) by the Union of South Africa to provide additional Native Reserves and the establishment of a South African Republic, preferably outside the Commonwealth.

The effect of Strydom's administration will be interesting to see. In the first place, he has blatantly slapped Dr. Malan and the Cape Nationalists in the face. If he continues to slap, there is a good chance that the Cape Nationalists will begin to slap back, causing a serious split in the Party's ranks.

In the second place, he will cause overseas opinion to harden even more against South African racial policy. And, in the third place, he will split Afrikaans- and

English-speaking South Africans into even more widely separated camps by pressing the issue of the Republic. With all this opinion against him, it is hard to see how he will be able to put all his policies into effect.

Many South Africans are saying that Strydom is bound to moderate his views now that he is Prime Minister. It was all very well for him to make extreme statements when he was not leader of the Party and didn't have to worry about carrying them out, they say. Schweltnus, who has had an opportunity to study Strydom close-at-hand for the past several years, disagrees. "He lives by his beliefs," Otto said of Strydom. "He will not give them up because of adverse public opinion."

I think Otto is probably right. Strydom has grown up with his ideals of an Afrikaner nation, outside the Commonwealth, based on white supremacy and apartheid. He has delivered speech after uncompromising speech in the burning, South African sun, telling people in the cities and the platteland towns just what they can expect of him.

He may have to soften his approach to cater to foreign nations which would be all-important to the commerce or defence of a South African Republic. But he will not deviate far from what he considers his sacred duty.



The "Lion of the Waterberg" has always been regarded as the logical first president of the South African Republic. As a matter of fact, one of the cheers which rang after him as he drove away from the Pretoria Raadsaal was "Ons President" ("Our President"). His supporters have good reason to believe that the Republic is coming--soon, now that Strydom is in charge.

Sincerely,

Peter Bird Martin

Peter Bird Martin

P. S. One of Strydom's first moves has been

to appoint his brother-in-law, Jan de Klerk, chief secretary of the Nationalist Party in the Transvaal, as Minister of Labor. De Klerk recently covered himself with glory by referring to Mrs. Pandit, U.N. General Assembly President, as a "coolie woman."