

# APARTHEID MEANS SLAVERY

FEBRUARY IS CONSIDERED BLACK HISTORY MONTH. IT IS ALSO THE MONTH TEN YEARS AGO THAT NELSON MANDELA WAS RELEASED FROM PRISON AFTER A QUARTER OF A CENTURY IMPRISONMENT. HE WAS ELECTED SOUTH AFRICA'S FIRST BLACK PRESIDENT IN 1964.

*"The South African government is an insult to humanity and deserves the contempt of all civilized beings."*

~THE PROGRESSIVE (1985)

*"We must all live together as brothers, or perish together as fools."*

~MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

The irresistible press of history extinguished the apartheid government of White South Africa which spent most of the 20th Century resisting it with a system of slavery that, with brief but periodic exceptions, became repulsive to civilization in the 19th Century. White South Africa had imposed itself too long on the world and on its captive people, and finally history finished it off, although the trauma apartheid inflicted will persist for quite some time.

White South Africa was itself an anachronism, a lost colony left behind and isolated by the crumbling empires of Europe. It was a final vestige of a colonial system that began five centuries ago when Europe started its surge across the planet. Much of Africa was emptied to provide slaves for European colonies in the Western Hemisphere, and most of Africa itself was colonized by European nations. For centuries, Africans who were not sent across the oceans as slaves were enslaved at home.

The two great wars of the 20th century devastated European power and broke up its empires into independent states, most of which reverted to some form of home rule. The African colonies collapsed in the same manner until, almost alone on the continent and in the world, the white dominated government of South Africa remained.

From the start the draconian concept of apartheid, which means separation, was White South Africa's defense against cultural extinction, a final entrenchment by an embattled political system struggling to survive awhile longer. The entire brutal state apparatus that was designed to deny any political identity or power to the black majority (70% of the population) could only be a stall against the inevitable tide of their disquiet, and served as a final laceration that ensured their rise to crush it. The systematic arrests and murders of emerging black leaders spawned the appearance of others: the detention, torture and killing of children to stifle newer generations of insurgents only guaranteed their growth. Each step to maintain the regime was a greater atrocity that created a proportionate response. By the time reforms were offered to appease revolt they were long past the needs or desires of those in revolt and most of the time too late to stop them. Once the insurgents' power was recognized by acts of reform, they were too powerful to resist. All of the terrible crippling pain, fear and hatred that had been stifled and stored up for so long seemed perpetually prone to explode into rage, and the death dance between oppressor and oppressed speeded up, ruthlessness and reaction evolving inexorably toward dénouement.

Survival was the major object of apartheid and the question why White South Africa would want to survive was as irrelevant as why any organism should wish to endure. White South Africa could not afford to compromise or its visceral history would be lost. Its white culture, however much it repulsed most of the rest of the world, deceived itself that it was vital and historically legitimate. That its memory would undoubtedly be a legacy of intolerance and contempt was not necessarily apparent to itself. Nations like persons are not greatly noted for honest self appraisal.

The real fear was that after white rule was dismantled genocide would be enacted against whites. There also was apprehension that the antipathy that had developed between the black factions and between them and blacks who worked for whites might erupt into a civil war or an immense pogrom. A native tyranny as harsh and ruthless as white rule was a great anxiety as well; history was a disquieting precedent — slow painful evolution toward political freedom was the hope but the tendency of regimes released from foreign domination has usually been in the opposite direction. The people of Africa have not fared especially well under the home rules that replaced European dominance, but the possibility of positive change is at least within their own borders.

In the end, the response of most of the world to the White South African apartheid government was critical and supportive of the revolt of the black masses. But that had



LANDEFELD (CHALK CIRCLE \*1, APRIL/MAY 1966)

been a long time coming. The U.S. government had conducted itself shamefully during the Cold War years, and so also had the Soviet Union up until its own dissolution. Each in its own manner subverted or openly enforced its will upon vast populations throughout the world, and each engaged in the subversion of weaker governments. Each condemned the deplorable regimes in alliance with the other and defended the same ruthlessness of its own allies.

As in most civil wars that occurred since World War 2, the struggle in South Africa was a miniature Cold War. For a long time rejected by the United States, South Africa's black liberation movement turned to the Soviet Union for weapons and equipment. The U.S. failed to realize that by siding with oppressive regimes it pushed the oppressed into the arms of the USSR; when Moscow helped the insurgents the U.S. claimed Soviet aid as an excuse to overtly or clandestinely furnish armaments to the ruling status quo to destroy the revolt while exaggerating its threat to U.S. interests. This is what occurred in South Africa for almost half a century.

And as it was with all such superpower disputes during the Cold War, the escalating trouble in South Africa threatened to be an incipient cause of nuclear war.

The way it ended was that the white regime in South Africa disappeared as a final European enclave in the Third World. Sanctions were imposed, trade halted, investments withdrawn, loans canceled, ambassadors recalled and relations severed. Finally the white regime was forced to surrender its rule. Apartheid departed history with a whimper rather than a bang.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER

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