

Documentaries, juxtaposed:

The CNN documentary, “*Cry Freetown*”, shot candidly by a Sierra Leonian cameraman, left me shaking. It depicted the phase of the extended Sierra Leone civil war in which intervening Nigerian troops fought the rebel RUF (Revolutionary United Front) amid the shambles of the capital city of Freetown.

While the RUF notoriously used child soldiers, the Nigerians deployed by the west African Economic Community Cease-Fire Monitoring Group (EOMOC) as ‘peacekeeping troops’ were hardly less brutal.

Among the intensely disturbing scenes of lashing, torture and execution of civilians was that of a terrified boy being dragged by the Nigerian soldiers from a building. They apparently assumed the child was a lookout for rebel snipers firing on ECOMOC jeeps. The naked boy rolled and jerked under the rain of blows from the soldiers. They then dumped his jerking body into the back of a pickup. From the earlier scene of bodies on the curbside, his execution seemed imminent. Yet in the subsequent scene he was shown heavily bandaged in a rehabilitation centre. The narrator then revealed that the boy was mentally disabled.

Even gasping in horror, I wondered how many viewers would just turn the channel as if from grisly scenes of car accidents. How many would dismiss these nightmarish scenes as typical of ‘darkest Africa?’

By this juncture in the documentary, 8-year-old MH on the other side of the basement sofa was covering his face with a cushion...



Fortunately, MH and his sisters were in bed when later in the evening when ‘*Anarchy*’ was aired on *CBC Newsworld*. It was an equally grisly documentary on civil war-torn Liberia.

This British production focused more on the stoned-craziness of the rag-tag fighters. They often grinned and preened for the camera. One seemed as proud of a Chicago Bulls tee-shirt as his AK-47. Another young thug proudly showed his *Ju-Ju* protection— a human finger... A Rasta-braided guerrilla swung a severed foot before nailing it on a door. Then on a pole beside a roadblock, cowed villagers were filmed looking up at a human head, buzzed by flies....

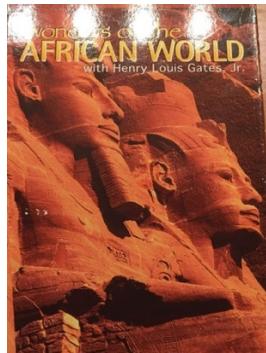
As in the earlier CNN documentary, there were haunting images of amputees— even young girls— whose hands were macheted by doped-up child soldiers. Dangerously numbed by gruesomeness, I flipped away from the channel before the end... Yet I did not turn off the TV.

Before the end of the evening, I was watching on PBS, the latest episode of '*Wonders of the African World*'. In it, the African American scholar, HL Gates was exploring sources of early Egyptian civilization in the upper Nile.

"I am an ancestor of Nubia," he proclaimed, "and of ancestors who not only built the pyramids of Egypt but ruled that ancient kingdom."

It occurred that it would be some time even the most Afrophilic American scholars would return to Sierra Leone or Liberia to claim their roots.

2000, February



Window lickers at war:



The essay “*Gangsta Wars*” by George Packer (from one of the recent *New Yorker* mags left by a colleague on the faculty room coffee table) was equally informative and disturbing. Packer describes how American pop culture’s poses and attitudes are manifested amidst the brutal violence of the factional fighting in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Just as Africa is a dumping ground for cast-off clothing, so too, it is a refuse heap of American pop-cultural symbols—often undifferentiated. The Bruegelian landscape of war is randomly littered with a diversity of images from Rambo to rapper Jay-Z...

Packer gives an example of tee-shirts sporting images both Osama and Bush as a fashion choice of the ‘gangsta’ warriors. He refers to a French sociologists’ description of such crude posturing as “*leche vitrine*”—“window licking” at the images behind the impenetrable shop window of western pop culture.

The same ‘gangtas’ proud of Nike shoes or a Rambo tee-shirt, are known for cutting off the limbs of terrorized civilians—including those of children. In a discussion of western responses to the horrors of the Sierra Leone civil war, Packer describes a project by an American prosthetist to fit child amputees in West Africa with prosthetic limbs. Many of the kids brought to the clinic in New York for prosthetic fitting have been adopted. Such adoptions tend to be regarded by Americans as humanitarian ‘rescue’ of disabled children. Packer ventures that the affected African families, deprived of the children they are deemed unfit to raise, are “twice mutilated.”

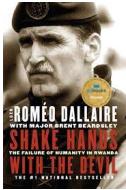
Yet the tragedy of this is still he weighed against the likely fate of these kids back in Sierra Leone. Packer offers an example of a child in Freetown seen wearing a prosthetic arm that looked like “a boxing glove attached to a rebar wire.”

I shuddered in that image at the same time as I was struck by the irony of reading Packer’s superb journalism in pages between exclusive advertising images (Gucci, Givenchy, Rolex). For the subjects of horror and pity, the momentary attention of a ‘*New Yorker*’ reader might also be considered “a double mutilation.”

2004, May



Beyond Hotel Rwanda:



The documentary '*Shake Hands with the Devil*', watched tonight on CBC TV, was much more about the torment of one man than about the unimaginable horror of a genocide.

Based on the memoir of the same name, the documentary was mostly a chronicle of the trip back to Rwanda by Romeo Dallaire on the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. The Canadian General Dallaire had been the head of the UN peacekeeping force during the 1994 horrors.

When the slaughter of Tutsis and their supporters by Hutu gangs began, Dallaire had faced an impossible dilemma: The tiny force of which he was given command was woefully underfunded. He pleaded for more resources—but his urgent requests were muffled in the Byzantine officialdom of the United Nations. Even as he begged for reinforcements, the French, Italian and Belgian units were withdrawing after having evacuated their (mostly white) nationals. In operating under strictly limited rules of engagement, the remaining UN force was toothless.

In the Balkans war during the same period, the muscular 'Protection Force' deployed by the UN has real authority for intervening in the fighting while protecting civilians. The UN ground troops were armed, and UN aircraft were authorised to fire upon violators of no-fly zones.

Meanwhile in Rwanda, the UN blue helmets could do little more than be bystanders to the slaughter. There were instances of UN standing beside their parked jeeps watching thugs with machetes dragging away victims.



In several scenes Dallaire is shown staring out vehicle windows, grimly watching the passing landscape. "It was a set up," he says at one point.

The setup is more nakedly revealed in another scene from the 1999 UN inquiry into the genocide. Therein Dallaire is berated by a Belgian diplomat for not having rescued Belgian soldiers killed in the early stage of the massacre. Pursued by a Belgian TV camera, Dallaire is also accused of failing to meet the soldiers' widows... The Belgian shoves his finger into the Canadian's face. Dallaire mumbles "bullshit" before walking away...

Although not explored in the documentary, the hypocrisy of the accusation is even more obscene in consideration of Belgium's horrific colonial legacy in Africa. In Rwanda alone, the imposition of minority Tutsi leadership upon the Hutus—is arguably a root cause of the region's inter-ethnic animosities.

"Do I care more about the deaths of 10 Belgian soldiers than 1,000,000 Africans?" Dallaire asks in another scene. "I don't." Nevertheless, the torment in his voice and his eyes is unmistakable.

In his reacquaintance tour of the streets of the capital, Kigali, Dallaire remembers feral dogs rooting for human carrion. He reveals that the medications he has taken over the last years have been unable to give him sleep let alone ease his conscience...

Still, the viewer might wonder: Why did he restrict his operation to every letter of his narrow mandate? In American maverick style, he might have directly confronted the murderers. Was his (typically Canadian?) virtue of following orders a tragic flaw?



The most moving sequence was Dallaire's address in the Kigali stadium before (mostly younger) Rwandans assembled to mark the 10th anniversary of the genocide. Speaking in French, he is bluntly—bitterly—honest with his audience:

He says that in the midst of the horrors in Rwanda, the world was scarcely paying attention. At the same time, however, the UN was focused on Yugoslavia. Thousands of UN soldiers were deployed there to intervene against "ethnic cleansing" among white Europeans... Meanwhile, in Rwanda, only 450 UN troops were committed to what was believed to be an inter-tribal conflict in a tiny country with "no strategic value."

In conclusion, Dallaire offers a wrenching apology: "Standing here before you as former force commander I say that I failed the Rwandan people..."

His message to Rwandans—steeped in irony—was never to forget that in their hour of desperation, they were effectively left alone. However sincere the *post facto* apologies from the world community, they should remember that in the midst of the conflict the extent of international attention was subject to a cold calculus. In that calculus they were not Tutsi and Hutu with distinct histories and cultures but were regarded as equally poor, benighted, and insignificant Africans... That gross injustice should give them even greater determination to transcend their old divisions and take control of their destiny...

In listening to this segment, I thought briefly of Tanzania, an African country that prides itself on having transcended tribalism. Of course, it is easier to forge a spirit of unity among a multitude of diverse groups than between two peoples of distinctly different origins, such as Tutsi and Hutu squeezed together in political boundaries drawn by colonial rulers. But more than any other Africans—Tutsis and Hutus now know the alternative outcome of not trying...



Among the voices in the documentary were esteemed fellow Canadians vouching for Dallaire's moral absolution. Among them was G. Caplan, history professor, political pundit and frequent CBC talking head (I once knew him as a Field Staff Officer for CUSO). Caplan opines that the former commander was placed in an impossible situation in Rwanda and that his self-torment is tragically needless.... In briefly addressing factors that exacerbated the conflict, Caplan draws attention to the role of the Catholic church. He points out that the clergy, despite their unique position of trust in an overwhelmingly Catholic country, did almost nothing to quell the rising inter-tribal suspicion and hatred among their flock...

Another commentator (and friend of Dallaire) is former Canadian UN ambassador, S. Lewis. He speaks of the tragedy in Uganda in the broad scope of human nature. No one knows, he says, exactly what triggers human beings to be swept up in blind hatred of 'the other'. Yet when humans do "go berserk" and commit genocide, the burden falls to all of us to understand the specific context—and take warning...

Finally, in the documentary, Dallaire, speaks of a tense meeting with a Hutu warlord who would go on to commit atrocities. He says as a diplomatic gesture, he shook the man's hand. There was something so cold in the man's hand and in his eyes, Dallaire says, that in the instant of contact "he could have shaken the hand of the devil." Hence the title of his memoir...

The documentary reveals a Romeo Dallaire who returned to Rwanda in 2004 to be a lot more complex than the hand-wringing Canadian general of the UN peacekeeping force played by Nick Nolte in '*Hotel Rwanda*'.

My final thought on the film: if, as S. Lewis suggests, the demon that emerged in Rwanda, in Yugoslavia, in Nazi Germany—is potentially within us all—we need every grain of accumulated wisdom to prevent the demon from reemerging in own tribal territories...

2005, February

In partial defense of the #419 scammers:

URGENT BUSINESS PROPOSAL

WE HAVE THIRTY MILLION U.S. DOLLARS WHICH WE GOT FROM OVER INFLATED CONTRACT FROM CRUDE OIL CONTRACT AWARDED TO FOREIGN CONTRACTORS IN THE NIGERIAN NATIONAL PETROLEUM CORPORATION (NNPC). WE ARE SEEKING YOUR ASSISTANCE AND PERMISSION TO REMIT THIS AMOUNT INTO YOUR ACCOUNT. YOUR COMMISSION IS THIRTY PERCENT OF THE MONEY.

PLEASE NOTIFY ME YOUR ACCEPTANCE TO DO THIS BUSINESS URGENTLY. THE MEN INVOLVED ARE MEN IN GOVERNMENT. MORE DETAILS WILL BE SENT TO YOU BY FAX AS SOON AS WE HEAR FROM YOU. FOR THE PURPOSE OF COMMUNICATION IN THIS MATTER, MAY WE HAVE YOUR TELEFAX, TELEX AND TELEPHONE NUMBERS INCLUDING YOUR PRIVATE HOME TELEPHONE NUMBER.

CONTACT ME URGENTLY THROUGH THE FAX NUMBER ABOVE.

PLEASE TREAT AS MOST CONFIDENTIAL, ALL REPLIES STRICTLY BY DHL COURIER, OR THROUGH ABOVE FAX NUMBER.

THANKS FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION.

YOURS FAITHFULLY,


PRINCE JONES DIMKA
3-4-95

In the latest orgy of web-surfing, I stumbled upon a site called: '*419-Eater.com*'. It is purportedly dedicated to fighting the internet fraud often referred to as the #419 scam—the number designating both an FBI code and the applicable anti-larceny statute in Nigeria, where the scam so often originates...

Scarcely anyone who uses email has been spared at least one invitation to share in a fortune supposedly tied up in bribable foreign government officialdom. The receiver of the message need only provide details of his/her local bank account for the transfer of funds. Since the story often involves the supposed fortune of a high official or royalty, the scam is also known as the 'Nigerian Prince' scam. It has origins in a 19th century confidence trick known as 'the Spanish Prisoner,' wherein the hand of a beautiful daughter often spiced the enticement of a secret payoff...

It seems surprising that so many 'marks' fall for unsolicited emails in odd English (e.g.: '*Please notify me your acceptance to do this business urgently*') but apparently not only the senile do. It is hard to estimate the numbers of victims given the embarrassment of those snared...

So it is that a scam-baiting site such as '*419-Eater*' has emerged as a would-be nemesis of the #419 perpetrators. On these sites, the baiters report how they played along with the fraudsters and gained their trust before turning the tables. The details of the pranking are then reported along with bizarre photos confirming the sting. The viewer is to assume that authorities have been tipped off and another vile scammer put out of business.



Yet as a viewer of these sites, it is difficult to cheer the foiling of a would-be fraudster without sharing in the attendant cruelty. The photos, displayed as trophies, typically show African men in humiliating poses. Some hold signs with silly messages such as: '*Ima Wayne Kerr*'. Others have a pail, a fish or a dunce cap on their heads. The mockery contrasts with their serious expressions. Adolescent yuk-yuks aside—one could well be reminded of photos from old cracker carnivals in the southern USA, where the heads in the bulls' eyes of the dunk tanks were those of black men...

Yet one might wonder: how could supposedly shrewd scammers get tricked into such demeaning poses? In such regard I recall many conversations from Nigeria (*circa* '77-'78) about the attraction of 'secret societies.' Some involved witchcraft, others were more similar to the Rosicrucian or Masonic orders. It was widely believed that membership in secret societies could confer wealth and privilege. I was also informed that anyone seeking to join one had to undergo elaborate rites.

Obviously, the scam baiters play on this vulnerability. Typically, the baiter tells the Nigerian fraudster that trust can only be established in the partnership by the undertaking of a specific ritual. The photo showing compliance is extended like a Freemason's secret password...

One might also wonder how the would-be scammer, holed up with an old computer that could crash at any moment, is any more able to judge trustworthiness than the foreigner he/she is hoping to scam... To understand that, one might consider that for many Nigerians who have never been abroad, western culture is exotic and mysterious. For those unfamiliar with white people's ways, a request for a photo of a fish held over one's head can be no stranger than a request for one with a dog licking a person's face...

Also, one might speculate that the scammer, after going days without a nibble, would seize on the merest jiggle on the phishing line. The potential for a peek into an exotic world might be just as attractive as the potential for scamming...

Although not experienced in having had my bank account cleaned out by internet fraud—I cannot look at those '*419-Eater*' photos and see criminals receiving just deserts. In those faces, I still see Nigerians as I primarily remember them: friendly and curious, however desperate their circumstances. I imagine that even when suspecting that a mark is just playfully tugging on the bait—many Nigerian phishers still try to prolong the connection for the sake of the communication alone. Even when there is little hope of a jackpot—maybe the exotic phish offers the potential for foreign travel—even friendship or romance...

In regard to the desperation in the eyes of some of those Nigerians tricked into (frankly racist) mockery, I sadly think an Igbo friend and colleague I kept in touch over many years after we worked together in the same school in northern Nigeria. In his letters, he described his many schemes to support a growing family in a country sinking ever deeper into poverty and corruption. From teaching to journalism, to farming and to business ventures—his hopes were repeatedly dashed. In one letter he described an attempt to smuggle a load of shoes from Cameroons. After getting ripped off by a double-crossing partner he nearly succumbed to yellow fever... *'If life continues as desperate as this,'* he wrote, *'I don't think I will last much longer.'*

I haven't heard from CI in nearly a decade. If my dear old friend is still alive, I wouldn't be surprised if he has at least been tempted to try his hand at phishing...

As for '419-Eater' site—it is no less despicable than another sadistic site I recently stumbled upon... Called '*Bumfights*', it featured video clips of fights between homeless men in San Diego. The vile boys who filmed them reportedly paid the participants in drugs or liquor.

Although I could barely stomach 5 minutes of such video, it was certainly long enough for me to share in the guilt of complicity. It was but the latest warning that a headlong plunge into the virtual sewer is but a click way...

2006, August

Rhodesians do die:



The news of the death of Ian Smith struck me with an unexpected ambivalence. The obit in the online *Guardian* (no doubt prepared years in advance) stated what was well known: that Smith had been a WWII fighter pilot and a farmer before becoming leader of the ultra-conservative Rhodesian Front. Then as Prime Minister of Rhodesia, he defied Great Britain in 1965 by declared a UDI (Universal Declaration of Independence) in order to maintain white minority rule. Of course, it was stated that he once declared that majority rule in his country could never happen “in a thousand years.” (A prediction that would prove to be at least 975 years awry).

Even if Smith’s demise is a footnote to a malicious lost cause, it comes with a certain solemnity. It is rather similar to the solemnity attending the extinction of any species—even a pernicious one—extinction being forever...

To be clear, I have never doubted that the regime that Smith led to its dying days was abhorrent. Well before I lived in Zimbabwe, I paid close attention to its politics. In 1980 I rejoiced in the Rhodesian flag coming down. Yet in marking Smith’s death, I cannot fail to remember his warnings about the new order that would sweep away the old abhorrent one...



In marking the historical moment, I spent last evening visiting websites of Rhodesian nostalgia:

In perusing articles of the historical journal ‘*Rhodesiana*’ from the ‘60s-‘70s, I was reminded that over the century of its existence, white Rhodesia created its own constellation of myths and heroes. Notable among them is the epic of Alan Wilson and the Shangani Patrol. During the 1893 Ndebele rebellion’, Major Wilson and his small unit of British South Africa Company soldiers were ambushed by Ndebele warriors near the Shangani River. Vastly outnumbered, they held their ground and fought to the death...

It is hardly surprising that mythically fearless pioneers like Wilson would be especially inspirational to ‘Rhodies’ in the 1970s, during the expanding bush war. Their self-declared

republic was ejected from the British commonwealth and subjected to UN-mandated sanctions. Commie-duped “terrs” were striking on the borders of their towns. Rhodesians believed that against the odds, they had mounted, man for man, the finest fighting force in the world. Like the pioneers who pushed back the African veld to carve out an enclave of civilization, they were (momentarily) determined to tough it out.



In recalling that the glorification of the Rhodesian Defense Forces (the RDF) was reflected in popular ballads of the era, I searched YouTube to listen to a few. Therein I found ‘Troopie songs’ – an album featuring numbers such as ‘Jungle Green’, ‘Warriors Bold’ and ‘We Stand Alone’ in the patriotic vein of ‘Ballad of the Green Berets’ of America’s Vietnam war era. Not surprisingly, the same collection by John Edmond (himself an RDF volunteer) included ‘the Shangani Patrol’.

In another search I found the most popular tune of the genre— ‘Rhodesians Never Die’. The U-tube video of this catchy ballad (penned by one Clem Tholet— Smith’s own stepson) shows scenes of Selous Scouts parachuting into the bush and Hunter-Hawker jets peeling off on bombing raids into Zambia. Its refrain:

*‘Cause we’re all Rhodesians and we’ll fight through thick and thin
 We’ll keep our land a free land from the enemy comin’ in...
 We’ll keep them north of the Zambezi till that river’s running dry
 This mighty land will prosper for Rhodesians never die!*

Recalling that ‘Rhodesians Never Die’ was the unofficial anthem of Rhodesia in its dying years, I wondered what had been the official anthem before an independent Zimbabwe adopted ‘Ishe Komborera Africa [God bless Africa]’. I discovered ‘Rise, O voices of Rhodesia’, adopted after UDI:

*Rise, O voices of Rhodesia,
 God may we Thy bounty share.
 Give us strength to face all danger,
 And where challenge is, to dare!*

It was not the least surprising that the lyrics were audaciously set to Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy’. In declaring UDI, the Rhodesians had assumed that they were defending white civilization in Africa. While Europe was surrendering to socialism and permissiveness—Rhodesians regarded themselves as the true keepers of what was best in the western heritage. While believing

themselves betrayed by the motherland, they adored their queen and was proud of a plucky Prime Minister who defended England from a takeover by the Huns...

Yet all the bluster amounted only to hubris when the facade came crashing down around their ears...



When I first arrived in January 1982, Zimbabwe was still visibly in transition from Rhodesia. The white population had been shrinking by the month but the downtown core of Salisbury (yet to be renamed Harare) still looked more like a provincial city in New Zealand than an African capital.

Once when coming out of the Standard Chartered Bank, I caught sight of Smith himself. He was looking into a display window of one of the smart shops along 1st Street. Lean and craggy faced, he was unmistakably recognizable from his photographs. He was then the parliamentary leader of the white minority 'Republican Front'. Whether or not he was recognized by other passersby, both black and white, he attracted little attention. In those last few months of the post-independence honeymoon, the mood in the capital was that eerily relaxed...

In the following years teaching at rural African schools, my contacts with 'Rhoddies' were rare. First among the few memorable ones was with a Mr. Patterson whose farm neighboured the boarding school where I had been posted. During the war, his farm had been spared guerrilla attacks due to his reputedly fair treatment of his labourers. He also often donated supplies to the school. My principal, assuming that his first non-African teacher would be glad to meet a fellow white, drove me to Mr. Patterson's farm soon after my arrival.



Passing from the dusty TTL (Tribal Trust Land) into lush pastures and fields of tobacco and maize was a first glimpse of the old order of land distribution, up to then unaddressed. As for the brief chat over tea in the kitchen of the middle-aged couple, I can only recall how the cordial wife of Mr. Patterson chided her husband for eating a second biscuit ("Remember your blood pressure, dear!") There was certainly no mention of politics.

Other brief exchanges with Rhodies that come to mind include one with a former RDF (Rhodesian Defense Forces) soldier on a neighbouring stool of the Sportsman's bar in the Jameson Hotel in

Harare. After I identified myself as a teacher in a rural school, he mumbled: “You foreign do-gooders— you’re makin’ things worse for us!”

A couple of beers later he begrudgingly acknowledged that even misguided foreigners at least added to the ever-diminishing numbers of whites...

Over the following years, I also heard numerous diatribes from Rhoddies who picked me up hitchhiking. The typical rant was about collapsing standards and corruption of the ruling regime. There was usually a sharing of some insight about the tribal nature of “the Afs”, which made them unfit for running a modern country... Even in repugnance of such views, I was always curious about the attitudes of whites bred and born in African soil.... I was always left to wonder— had I been born in Rhodesia, would I have imbibed similar prejudices?

I was also well aware of the small minority who identified as white Zimbabwean. During UDI, liberals supported racial equality at great personal risk. Some were inspired by religious conviction— like Prime Minister Garfield Todd, who expanded education for Africans back in the 1950s. He was ousted by Rhodesian conservatives. Then after a long life of community service, Todd was stripped of citizenship by Mugabe whom he had initially supported...

In the decades of UDI, those white liberals, like their black nationalist counterparts, often paid dearly for their beliefs. One white Zimbabwean I was privileged to know in the mid-1980s as a teaching colleague, had been a conscientious objector during the war. For refusing his call-up, he was imprisoned and subjected to cruelty by Smith’s goons. This gentle colleague and his family stayed on in Zimbabwe even as the declining ‘standards’ fell into a tailspin...



When I returned on a family visit to Zimbabwe in 1998, I was shocked by the squalor of downtown Harare. Refugees from the drought-stricken countryside camped on urine-reeking side streets. The once manicured flowerpots of 1st Street overflowed with refuse. Meanwhile, prices seemed to have risen tenfold within the decade. Yet that was before the introduction of billion-dollar banknotes. I also well recall from that 1998 visit, the dire predictions from my ex-wife’s relatives, both ‘coloured’ and African. Yet I could never have then imagined that the Mugabe regime would turn out worse than even the Rhodesians warned...

Mugabe’s political cunning was only outmatched by his staggering economic mismanagement. It took just 20 years— 5 years short of the era of UDI— for his regime to transform an African breadbasket into an African basket case.

The down-spiraling economy was accelerated by the 2000 referendum on a one-party state. Despite the usual subjugation to patronage and terror—the cowed African populace did the unthinkable—they voted ‘no.’ Mugabe was particularly incensed with the remaining whites. They might have followed the example of the whites in Kenya, who enjoyed their privileges but stayed out of politics. Yet the whites of Zimbabwe—many of them farmers—chose instead to support the growing opposition party...

So it was that the ‘*wovits*’ [bush war veterans] set about ‘liberating’ the white farms. They claimed they were addressing Rhodesia’s original sin. As police stood by, the *wovits* (directed by their leader, ‘Hitler’ Hunzvi) drove the ‘settlers’ out of their farms and torched their buildings. Thousands of farm labourers were set adrift, unemployed. Several white farmers were murdered.

Mugabe at first remained silent. Then in political calculation, he praised the seizures as revolutionary justice, long overdue...

Certainly, the failure to resettle *povo* [peasants] on land stolen from their ancestors had been long festering. Although resettlement has been a key part of the Lancaster House Agreement that paved the way Zimbabwean independence, the processes had been too long delayed. Even those Zimbabwean opponents of Mugabe insist that the British share in the blame—reneging on agreements to provide funding for buying out willing sellers. What was needed were orderly processes combined with training...

Yet the farmland seized by the mobs in 2000 was not redistributed in any orderly fashion—and very little of it resettled by landless *povo*. No surprise—most of it was handed over to Mugabe and his cronies. Agricultural production immediately plummeted... Back in the 1980s, pyramids of maize awaited export at every railhead. By the early 2000s, Zimbabwe was barely able to import enough mealie meal to feed its near-starving population...

Beset by calamities of AIDS and drought in the midst of galloping inflation and chronic unemployment, hundreds of thousands of black Zimbabweans have followed the former Rhodesians in “taking the gap.” From South Africa to Europe, from Australia to North America—Zimbabwe’s best and brightest are scattered across the globe... As for the tiny white population—with a few exceptions—only a handful of those too poor, too sick or too old to get away, remain...

In his recent memoir, ‘*When a Crocodile Eats the Sun*’, Zimbabwe-born journalist, Peter Godwin, chronicles his visit with his dying father in a Harare suburb. In wrenching detail, he describes the pathos that the Mugabe regime has wrought upon Zimbabwe’s most vulnerable. In one passage, he describes how his elderly white parents turn away empty handed from a bakery counter before a well-dressed black woman charitably pays for the ‘luxury’ loaf they were unable to afford. After decades of fueling race hatred, Godwin ironically observes, Comrade Mugabe brought blacks and whites together in sharing abject poverty...



Ian Smith remained almost to the bitter end. After retiring from parliament, he lived in a “modest house” in Harare. He published his memoir, ‘*The Great Betrayal*’ (1997), before the worst of his grim predictions were borne out. He never ceased in his defiant critiques of the Mugabe regime but was never arrested. In an odd way, Mugabe seemed to regard him untouchable...

According to the *Guardian* obit, in his final years “Good old Smithy” was often greeted warmly by Africans on the streets of Harare. He still maintained his farm in the Midlands Province. Like the surrounding Shona villagers whose language he spoke from boyhood, he loved his prize herd of cattle...

Eventually in need of better medical care, he lived out his final years in Cape Town. Yet soon before his final departure, his Zimbabwe citizenship was revoked, and his beloved farm seized...



In thinking again of Smith’s “not in a thousand years” statement, I remembered a conversation with my ex-wife’s Aunt Violet during our 1998 visit. In bemoaning the political situation, Violet, who lived much of her life as a Rhodesian ‘coloured’ woman, said:

“When Mr. Smith said Africans would never rule this country in a thousand years, what he *really* meant was that it would take a thousand years before they stopped making a bloody shamble of it. He was right, you know!”

I could not agree with the kindly Aunt Violet—yet I could neither dismiss her comment off hand...

If a portrait of Ian Smith were to appear in a rogue’s gallery of 20th century history, it would only be one among several in the Africa section. He was not grossly venal, like Mobuto of the former Zaire, or sadistic like Uganda’s Idi Amin. In some manner, Smith did embody old-school British Tory values. Against his stubbornness is undeniable physical courage. Along with his willful blindness was a crooked gaze from old injuries sustained in crashing his Spitfire in the Battle of Britain...

But he cannot escape the judgement of history. During the quarter century of UDI, he fought to preserve the privileges of a mere 2% of his population while holding back the advancement of

98%. In 1965, he could have negotiated an orderly decolonization. He could have avoided a prolonged bush war that claimed tens of thousands of victims—mostly African. He could have helped midwife an independent African country where his white farmers could have lived comfortably and productively—while steering clear of politics.

In such an alternate history, his successor might have been a nationalist in the mould of Kenya's Kenyatta, Tanzania's Nyerere—or even a Zimbabwean Mandela. Yet by attempting to stave off the inevitable—by allowing gross injustices to fester for 25 years—he paved the way for a Mugabe...

The *Guardian* obit also mentioned that after his retirement from the legislature, Smith's door was always open. He apparently loved to engage visitors in conversation. He probably loved to reminisce the glory days when Rhodesia busted sanctions and defied import bans by manufacturing everything it needed from tires to medicines. He probably still took delight in singeing the ears of naive liberals who presumably knew nothing of the “real” Africa. He must have especially enjoyed pointing out how he accurately warned of the wrack and ruin that would come of majority rule...

One might wonder whether the oracle of history offers anything more than a booby prize for accuracy in forecasting the doom of one's own tribe...

2007, November
