Out of Africa

When the sun set on the British Empire, chaos overtook the former colonies.

By Theodore Dalrymple

AS SOON AS I qualified as a doctor, I went to Rhodesia, which was to transform itself into Zimbabwe five years later. In the next decade I worked and traveled a great deal in Africa and could not help but reflect upon the clash of cultures, the legacy of colonialism, and the practical effects of good intentions unadulterated by any grasp of reality. I gradually came to the conclusion that the rich and powerful can indeed have an effect upon the poor and powerless—perhaps even remake them but not necessarily (in fact, necessarily not) in the way they wanted or anticipated. The law of unintended consequences is stronger than the most absolute power.

Until my arrival at Bulawayo Airport, the British Empire had been for me principally a philatelic phenomenon. When I was young, Britain's still astonishing assortment of far-flung territories—from British Honduras and British Guiana to British North Borneo, Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland—each issued beautiful engraved stamps with the queen's profile in the right upper corner, looking serenely down upon exotic creatures such as orangutans or frigate birds or upon natives going about their natively tasks, tapping rubber or climbing coconut palms. To my childish mind, any political entity that issued such desirable stamps must have been a power for good. And my father, a Communist by conviction, also encouraged me to read the works of G.A. Henty, late 19th-century adventure stories extolling the exploits of empire builders, who by bravery, sterling character, superior intelligence, and *force majeure* overcame the resistance of such spirited but doomed peoples as the Zulu and the Fuzzy Wuzzies. Henty might seem an odd choice for a Communist to give his son, but Marx himself was an imperialist of a kind, believing that European colonialism was an instrument of progress toward History's happy denouement; only at a later stage, after it had performed its progressive work, was empire to be condemned.

And condemned Rhodesia most certainly was, loudly and insistently, as if it were the greatest threat to world peace and the security of the planet. I expected to find on my arrival, therefore, a country in crisis. Instead, I found a country that was thriving: its roads were well maintained, its transport system functioning, its cities manifesting a municipal pride long gone from England. The large hospital in which I was to work, while stark and somewhat lacking in comforts, was extremely clean and ran with exemplary efficiency. The staff had a vibrant *esprit de corps*, and the hospital had a reputation for the best of medical care. The rural poor would make immense and touching efforts to reach it: they arrived covered in the dust of their long journeys. The African nationalist leader and foe of the government, Joshua Nkomo, was a patient there and trusted the care implicitly, for medical ethics transcended all political antagonisms.

The surgeon for whom I worked, who came from England, was the best I have ever known and a man of exemplary character. Devoting his enormous technical accomplishment to the humblest of patients, he seemed not only capable of every surgical procedure, but he was a brilliant diagnostician, his clinical intuition honed by a relative lack of high-tech aids. He saved hundreds every year and inspired the most absolute trust and confidence in his patients. He never panicked, even in the direst emergency, and he knew what to do when a man had been half eaten by a crocodile or mauled by a leopard, when a child had been bitten in the leg by a puff adder, or when a man appeared with a spear driven through his skull. When called in the early hours of the morning, he was as even-tempered as if attending a social event.

He was not a missionary, however. He was infused by nothing resembling a religious spirit, only by a profound medical ethic and an enthusiasm for his art and science. He wanted an interesting surgical practice, and he wanted to save human life. Rhodesia offered him ideal conditions for using his skills to maximum benefit. Within a short time of the political handover in 1980, however, he returned to England because the swift degeneration of standards at the hospital made the high-level practice of surgery impossible. The institution that had seemed to me on my arrival to be so solid and well founded fell apart in the historical twinkling of an eye.

In returning to England, he accepted a much-reduced standard of living. Talleyrand said that he who had not experienced the *ancien régime* (as an aristocrat, of course) knew nothing of the sweetness of life. The same might be

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said of him who had not experienced life as a colonial in Africa. I, whose salary was by other standards small, lived at a level that I have scarcely equaled since. It is true that Rhodesia lacked many consumer goods at that time, due to economic sanctions, but what I learned from this lack is how little consumer goods add to the quality of life.

The real luxuries were space and beauty—and the time to enjoy them. With three doctors, I rented an elegant colonial house set in beautiful grounds tended by a garden "boy" called Moses (the "boy" in garden boy or houseboy implied no youth: once, in East Africa, I was served by a houseboy who was 94, who had lived in the same family for 70 years, and who would have seen the suggestion of retirement as insulting). Surrounding the house was a flagstone veranda where breakfast was served on linen in the cool of the morning, the soft light of the sunrise spreading through the foliage of the jacaranda trees; even the harsh cry of the go-away bird seemed grateful on the ear. It was the only time in my life when I have arisen from bed without a tinge of regret.

I have never worked harder, and I can still conjure up the heavy feeling in my head, as if it were full of lead shot and could snap off my neck under its own weight. The luxury of our life was this: that, our work once done, we never had to perform a single chore for ourselves. The rest of our time, in our most beautiful surroundings, was given over to friendship, sport, study, hunting—whatever we wished. Of course, our leisure rested upon a pyramid of startling inequality and social difference. The staff who freed us of life's inconveniences lived an existence that was opaque to us, though they had quarters only a few yards from where we lived. Their hopes, wishes, fears, and aspirations were not ours; their beliefs, tastes, and customs were alien to us.

Our very distance made our relations with them unproblematic. We studiously avoided that tone of spoiled and bored querulousness for which colonials were infamous. We never resorted to that staple of colonial conversation, the servant problem, but were properly grateful. Like most of the people I met in Rhodesia, we tried to treat our staff well. In return, they treated us with genuine solicitude. We assuaged our consciences by telling ourselves what was no doubt true—that they would be worse off without our employ—but we couldn't help feeling uneasy.

By contrast, our relations with our African medical colleagues were harder edged because the social, intellectual, and cultural distance between us was far reduced. Rhodesia was still a white-dominated society, but for reasons of practical necessity, and in a vain attempt to convince the world that it was not as monstrous as made out, it had produced a growing cadre of educated Africans. Unsurprisingly, they were not content to remain subalterns under the permanent tutelage of whites, so that our relations with them were superficially polite, but human warmth was difficult. The black doctors who earned the same salary as we whites could not achieve the same standard of living for a very simple reason: they had an immense number of social obligations. They were expected to provide for an ever-expanding circle of family members and people from their village, tribe, and province. An income that allowed a white to live like a lord scarcely raised a black above the level of his family. Mere equality of salary, therefore, was quite insufficient to procure for them the standard of living that they saw the whites had and that it was only human nature for them to believe themselves entitled to, on account of the superior talent that had allowed them to raise themselves above their fellows.

These obligations also explain the fact, often disdainfully remarked upon by former colonials, that when Africans moved into the beautiful villas of their former colonial masters, the houses swiftly degenerated into a species of superior, more spacious slum. The degeneration of colonial villas had nothing to do with the intellectual inability of Africans to maintain them. Rather, the fortunate inheritor of such a villa was soon overwhelmed by relatives and others who had a social claim upon him. They brought even their goats with them, and one goat can undo in an afternoon what it has taken decades to establish.

It is easy to see why a civil service, controlled in its upper reaches by whites, could remain efficient and uncorrupt but could not long do so when manned by Africans. The thick network of social obligations explains why, while it would have been out of the question to bribe most Rhodesian bureaucrats, in only a few years it would have been out of the question not to try to bribe most Zimbabwean ones, whose relatives would have condemned them for failing to obtain on their behalf all the advantages their official opportunities might provide. Thus do the very same tasks in the very same offices carried out by people of different cultural and social backgrounds result in very different outcomes. Viewed in this light, African nationalism was a struggle as much for power and privilege as it was for freedom, though it co-opted the language of freedom for political advantage.

Of course, the solidarity and inescapable social obligations that corrupted public and private administration in Africa also gave a unique charm and humanity to life and served to protect people from the worst consequences of the misfortunes that buffeted them. There were always relatives whose unquestioned duty it was to help and protect. Africans tend to find our lack of

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such obligations puzzling and unfeeling—and they are not entirely wrong.

These considerations help explain the paradox that strikes so many visitors to Africa: the evident decency, kindness, and dignity of the ordinary people, and the fathomless iniquity, dishonesty, and ruthlessness of the politicians. This contrast recently struck me anew when a lawyer asked me to prepare a report on a Zimbabwean woman who had stayed illegally in England.

She was clearly in a disturbed state of mind. Mostly she looked down at the floor. When she looked up, her eyes seemed focused on infinity. She spoke hardly a word: her story was told me by her niece, a nurse who had fled to England some years before. During the war of "liberation," her brother had enlisted in the Rhodesian army. One day the nationalist guerrillas came to her village and commanded her parents to tell them where he was, that they might kill him as a traitor to the African cause. But not knowing his whereabouts, her parents could not answer and so, in front of her eyes, they tied her parents to trees and burned them to death. She was never able thereafter to lead a normal life. She did not marry, a social catastrophe for a woman in Zimbabwe. She was looked after by a cousin who worked for a white farmer, and she spent her life staring into space. Then the "war veterans" arrived, those who had allegedly fought for Zimbabwe's freedom—in reality, groups of party thugs intent upon dispossessing white farmers of their land in fulfillment of Mugabe's economically disastrous instructions. The white farmer and his black manager were killed, and all the workers were driven off the land. Hearing of her aunt's plight, her niece in England sent her a ticket. This story illustrates both the ruthless appetite for power unleashed by the colonial experience and the generosity of the great majority of Africans. The niece would look after her aunt uncomplainingly for the rest of her life, demanding nothing in return and regarding it as her plain duty to do so, also asking nothing from the British state.

My Zimbabwean experiences sensitized me to the chaos I later witnessed throughout Africa. The contrast between kindness on the one hand and rapacity on the other was everywhere evident, and I learned that there is no more heartless saying than that the people get the government they deserve. Who, *en masse*, could deserve an Idi Amin or a Julius Nyerere? Certainly not the African peasants I encountered. The fact that such monsters could quite explicably emerge from the people by no means meant that the people deserved them.

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It was often said that African states were artificial, created by a stroke of a European's pen that took no notice of social realities. This notion overlooks two salient facts. The countries in Africa that do actually correspond to social, historical, and ethnic realities—Burundi, Rwanda, and Somalia—have not fared better than those that do not. Moreover, in Africa, social realities are so complex that no system of boundaries could correspond. There are said to be up to 300 ethnic groups in Nigeria alone, often deeply intermixed geographically. Only extreme balkanization followed by profound ethnic cleansing could have resulted in the kind of boundaries that would have avoided this particular criticism of the European mapmakers. On the other hand, pan-Africanism was not feasible, for the kind of integration that could not be achieved on a small national scale could hardly be achieved on a vastly bigger international one.

In fact, it was the imposition of the European model of the nation-state upon Africa, for which it was peculiarly unsuited, that caused so many disasters. With no loyalty to the nation but only to the tribe or family, those who control the state see it only as an instrument of exploitation. Gaining political power is the only way ambitious people see to achieve the standard of living that the colonialists dangled in front of their faces.

But it is important to understand why another explanation commonly touted for Africa's postcolonial turmoil is mistaken: the view that the dearth of trained people in Africa at the time of independence is to blame. No history of the modern Congo catastrophe is complete without reference to the paucity of college graduates at the time of the Belgian withdrawal. And therefore the solution was obvious: train more people. Education in Africa became a secular shibboleth that it was impious to question.

The expansion of education in Tanzania, where I lived for three years, was indeed impressive. The literacy rate improved dramatically. School fees took precedence over every other expenditure. If anyone doubted the capacity of the poor to make investments in their own future, the conduct of the Tanzanians should have been sufficient to persuade him otherwise. (I used to lend money to villagers to pay the fees, and—poor as they were—they never failed to repay me.)

Unfortunately there was a harmful side to this effort. The aim of education was, in almost every case, that at least one family member should escape what

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Marx contemptuously called the idiocy of rural life and get into government service, from which he would be in a position to extort from the productive people in the country. The son in government service was social security, old-age pension, and secure income rolled into one. Farming, the country's indispensable economic base, was viewed as the occupation of failures, and so it was hardly surprising that the education of an ever larger number of government servants went hand in hand with an ever contracting economy. It also explains why there is no correlation between a country's number of college graduates at independence and its subsequent economic success.

The naïve supposition on which the argument for education rests is that training counteracts and overpowers a cultural worldview. A trained man is but a clone of his trainer, on this theory, sharing his every attitude and worldview. But in fact what results is a curious hybrid, whose fundamental beliefs may be impervious to the education he has received.

I had a striking example of this phenomenon recently, when I had a Congolese patient who had taken refuge in this country. He was an intelligent man and had that easy charm that I remember well. He had two degrees in agronomy and had trained in Toulouse in the interpretation of satellite pictures for agronomic purposes. He had worked for the UN Food and Agricultural Organization, and was used to dealing with Western aid donors and investors as well as academics. The examination over, we chatted about the Congo, and I asked him about Mobutu, whom he had known personally.

"He was very powerful," he said. "He collected the best witch doctors from every part of Zaire. Of course, he could make himself invisible; that was how he knew everything about us. And he could turn himself into a leopard when he wanted."

This was said with perfect seriousness. For him, the magical powers of Mobutu were more impressive and important than the photographic power of satellites. Magic trumped science. My Congolese patient was perfectly relaxed, but usually Africans feel constrained to disguise from Europeans their most visceral beliefs, for which they know the Europeans usually feel contempt. And so, in dealing with outsiders, Africans feel obliged to play an elaborate charade, denying their deepest beliefs in an attempt to obtain the outsider's minimal respect. In keeping their inner selves hidden, they are equalizing the disparity of power. The weak are not powerless: they have the power to gull the outsider.

Perhaps the most baleful legacy of British and other colonials in Africa was the idea of the philosopher-king, to whose role colonial officials aspired, and which they often actually played, bequeathing it to their African successors. Many colonial officials made great sacrifices for the sake of their territories, to whose welfare they were devoted, and they attempted to govern them wisely. But they left for the nationalists the instruments needed to erect the tyrannies and kleptocracies that marked post-independence Africa. They bequeathed a legacy of treating ordinary uneducated Africans as children, incapable of making decisions for themselves.

Take one example: the marketing boards of West Africa. Throughout West Africa, millions of African peasants under British rule set up small plantations for crops such as palm oil and cocoa. Then the British colonial governments had the idea, benignly intended, of protecting the peasant growers from the fluctuations of the marketplace. They set up a stabilization fund, under the direction of a marketing board. In good years the marketing board would withhold from the peasants some of the money their crops produced; in bad years it would use the money earned in the good years to increase their incomes.

Of course, for the system to work, the marketing boards would have to have monopoly purchasing powers. And it takes little imagination to see how such marketing boards would tempt an aspiring despot, such as Dr. Nkrumah, with grandiose ideas: he could use them in effect to tax Ghana's producers in order to fund his insane projects and to subsidize the urban population that was the source of his power, as well as to amass a personal fortune. A continent away, in Tanzania, Nyerere used precisely the same means to expropriate the peasant coffee growers, in the end causing them to pull up their coffee bushes and plant a little corn instead, which at least they could eat, to the great and further impoverishment of the country.

After several years in Africa, I concluded that the colonial enterprise had been fundamentally wrong and mistaken, even when, as was often the case in its final stages, it was benevolently intended. The good it did was ephemeral; the harm, lasting. The powerful can change the powerless, it is true; but not in any way they choose. The unpredictability of humans is the revenge of the powerless. What emerges politically from the colonial enterprise is often something worse, or at least more vicious because better equipped, than what existed before. Good intentions are certainly no guarantee of good results. ■

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Impolite Society

How ideological zeal and social distance silenced a disputatious capital

By Georgie Anne Geyer

THE FALL OF 2002 was one of the strangest eras that I have seen in Washington in my 30 years here. The certainty of a war that only a tiny inner circle could understand hung over the beautiful and usually loquacious white city on the Potomac like a drear cloak. Everyone knew it was only a matter of time before the United States was irrevocably at war with a faraway country it little knew, but only an illuminated handful could answer why.

Strangest of all was that in place of the deep discussions over America's pressing issues that such a time always demanded, there was only silence. The American people seemed mute, apparently preferring not to challenge a war that they were being told was linked to the humiliations of 9/11. While the think tanks, which have in recent years taken up the foreign-policy discussions formerly left to the universities, were scheduled up to their ears in conferences on Iraq, virtually all of the discussions were on the pro-war side. Even when the war's proponents made the most naïve or downright false observations and predictions, they were greeted by a silence that I have never seen in this disputatious capital, where intelligent discussion, it was always historically believed in America, would ultimately lead to truth.

Things were no better in the Congress, where there seemed to be no discussion at all except for the spry and pugnacious old Sen. Robert Byrd, who, even while he was taking a highly intelligent position on the coming war, seemed in that strange echoless chamber to be a ranting figure, a partly mad Capitol Hill Hamlet tearing his hair as he stalked the empty ramparts.

I made it my duty to attend session after session that fall to try to sense what was happening in Washington—and to the United States.

The end of September at the Heritage Foundation, I listened to the neoconservative writer Robert Kagan speak volubly about the "large middle class in Iraq" and how Iraq could "become a protectorate like Bosnia and Kosovo." Those of us who had bothered to go to Iraq over the years knew that most of the middle class had left two decades ago and that the cruel realities of Iraq made the Balkans look like Switzerland.

At the beginning of October at the American Enterprise Institute, the Iraqi writer Kanan Makiya, who like most of the exiles had not been home for decades, described the coming war as "an opportunity as large as the fall of the Ottoman empire in 1917" and said the new Iraqi state would be composed not of ethnic minorities but of citizens and insisted that it would be "demilitarized and renounce the use of force." At the same meeting, asked why he thought Iraq could be democratized, Princeton Islamic scholar Bernard Lewis repeated what he said at each of these meetings: "I had four graduate students from Iraq and they were very impressive."

When you think about it, of course, the fall of the Ottoman empire let loose chaos across the Middle East from Iraq to the Balkans, abolishing the Caliphate, which until then controlled all of Islam, and thus, in the absence of authority in Islam, led to the schisms—the fundamentalists of al-Qaeda against the traditionalists of Cairo's Al Azhar, for instance—which we are still dealing with today. The idea of the consummately violent Iraq "renouncing force" was bizarre: Iraq is a country that keeps reinventing new methods of force. But then, of course, those four intelligent graduate students would take care of that.

The most stunning example in these days and days of meetings, however—I attended seven, that I can count—came another day at Heritage, where Reuel Marc Gerecht, a hard-line neocon and former CIA man, was talking about how it would be up to American troops to divide the good local elites from the bad old Ba'athists. Dan Serwer, a well-informed former State Department man by then with the U.S. Institute of Peace, asked, his voice full of irony, "And how is the second lieutenant from Iowa going to decide who the local elites are and who are the Ba'athists?" Gerecht was unbowed. "It's not hard," he responded blithely, of arguably the most secretive and conspiratorial country on earth. "In Iraq, it's real easy. It's all out in the open. They'll know."

Outside of a few "misfits" like Serwer, who knew the world and were willing to speak out, virtually no one in the audience said anything. In every session that I attended, there was a simple acceptance of the most bizarre rewritings of history and the most incredible misunderstandings of human nature that I

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