

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

LCB-9 The Tortoise and the Hare in Africa

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Père Demeerseman, head of the Catholic missionary order of White Fathers in Tunisia, was one of the most attractive persons I met in that country. Approaching his fortieth year of service in Tunisia, Père Demeerseman has witnessed Tunisia's battle for political independence and its beginning adjustments to the modern world.

He has also seen the imposing position of the Church (and its even more imposing plans) wither away to almost nothing. It is no secret that the founder of the White Fathers, Cardinal Lavignerie (1825-1892), hoped to restore what was formerly Roman Africa to the Church. For an age which thrived on bold schemes this idea of reconverting to Christianity the homeland of St. Augustine was a pretty powerful dream.

Now we know better. Some even wonder whether it is either morally right or practically worthwhile for the White Fathers to remain in Tunisia at all. Doesn't the Tunisian experience suggest that the White Fathers should "cut their losses" and move on? If they stay, then for what purpose?

I put this question to Père Demeerseman -- as delicately as I could for it comes close to asking "Hasn't your life's work proved to be in vain?" His answer was a blend of resolution and humility. Accepting that any earlier dreams of rebuilding the Church in North Africa through reconversion must be laid aside, Père Demeerseman went on to emphasize that the role of the White Fathers (and really of all Christians) in North Africa should be solely that of witnesses for their religion. By their presence, by the daily example of their lives they would show a non-Christian area what Christians believe -- or should believe, and perhaps would lay the foundation for a better mutual understanding between the two great religions, Christianity and Islam. Even if a Tunisian Muslim should actively seek conversion the White Fathers would strive to convince him that he could best serve his God and his people by remaining within the Muslim community.

(Conversion from Islam to Christianity or vice-versa is almost ineluctably linked with emigration. The French girl who marries a Tunisian student in Paris and returns to Tunisia may become a Muslim, or the Muslim worker who marries and raises a family in France may become a Christian (or his children may), but in both cases this is no more than joining the dominant religion of one's immediate environment.)

What about this stand traced out by Père Demeerseman for the White Fathers in Tunisia? Is it pusillanimous and defeatist by seeking so little after having once aimed so high? Does it imply a flight from one's responsibilities? Does it lack dynamism?

I think most observers would agree that, on the contrary, this policy is realistic, and also both courageous and dynamic. In fact, we would probably get embarrassingly quick acceptance of Père Demeerseman's position -- so readily are such religious subjects dismissed in this age.

This is all I am going to say about the White Fathers, but I would like to suggest that the changed position of the Church in North Africa offers many parallels with the changed position of the Western world in Africa. In both cases a new approach is required, based not on past dreams and present regrets, but on a realistic calculation of just what can and should be done now.

The Western imperialists thought they could remake these countries in their own image. This was what the "white man's burden" was all about. There was much more pure idealism wrapped up in this whole movement than it is now popular to recognize, but nevertheless they failed. The African countries that have experienced Western colonialism will never be the same, but they are something very different from the would-be "home country."

At the present time their reaction to the former colonizer and to the civilization of which that colonizer is a part is peculiarly ambivalent. Their system of education and of law, their economic infrastructure, even many of their values and ideals derive from the heritage the colonizer left; but there is now a deep-seated psychological urge to make the former colonizer (and his civilization) a scapegoat for all present woes and hardships. This view of the ex-colonized regarding his former overlord, which in extreme cases manifests a real hatred, is not necessarily logical. This convenient scapegoat will be accused of not having created enough schools (to keep the people in ignorance). He will be accused of having created schools (French or English as the case may be, in order to destroy the native language and culture). He will be accused of not having developed the natural resources of the country (to keep the people backward and more easily managed). He will be accused of having developed the natural resources (for the profits of foreign capitalists).

Also if the former colonial power remains too much on the scene after independence there will be talk of the "new imperialism" and of "token independence," but if the power cuts its ties with the old colony too sharply there will be accusations of irresponsibility, betrayal and even of an attempt to push the newly independent country toward ruin in order to more easily exploit the ensuing chaos and anarchy.

In a word, most of the main instrumentalities of the old order are on probation in the newly independent Africa. The Church, the former colonizing power, the entire civilization whose late 19th Century vitality spilled over into the imperialistic scramble (and make no mistake, this category takes us in with a vengeance whatever our own feelings or our own record on this score of imperialism) are all suspect and will be for a long time to come. The period of probation depends, not too paradoxically, on our ability to keep out of the center of the picture. The more times we are hauled into the court of their public opinion, even on false charges, the longer will we be suspect.

This situation which parallels the problem faced by Père Demerseman and the White Fathers perhaps calls for a solution along the same lines: a new policy for a new age in Africa -- a policy of limited commitment. This is neither cowardly nor a shirking of responsibility. It is realism. It is a policy growing out of that sort of diplomatic maturity which does not panic in the face of apparent short-run losses.

Some might object that this means surrendering Africa to the Communists. Of course, we might lose Africa to the Communists. Everywhere in the world we are running the risk of losing to the Communists, and our salvation lies in finding the policy that has the best chance in each situation. Our choice is not whether to give the Communists a chance in Africa. They have that chance. This is completely out of our hands, but we can still influence the ground rules of our fight with the Communists in Africa.

If we can just "hold on" in Africa until the anti-colonial fever which makes our task so difficult now is dispelled we can defeat the Communists in Africa. The economic strength of Europe and America plus the existing trade patterns give us an overwhelming advantage. Militarily, lines of communication are in our favor (this is assuming a localized war, for Africa would be happily out of any general war).

On the other hand the present tendency in Africa is to put the worst interpretation on anything the West attempts and the best on anything originating in the Communist bloc. This unfortunate mentality can not be killed with kindness. The "full belly policy" which never worked under colonial administrations will be no more effective now. There is in Africa a fear of Western domination. This fear can only subside with time, with greater African exposure to other parts of the world, and with the African realization that the Communist

bloc does not have all the answers either. Communist influence in Africa is, of course, dangerous; but since it is already there we should waste no time and effort in the thankless role of unsolicited policemen..

Will we risk a modest commitment in return for a reasonable chance of success or will we gamble heavily with no better chance of success?

Others, approaching the problem from a different point of view, might object to the moral implications of such a limited commitment. Africa needs the things we can and should be providing, so the argument would go, and we can not escape our moral duty to undernourished (sometimes even starving) masses by mouthings about tactics and timing.

If it were in our power to alleviate poverty and create a more viable world -- or even a more viable Africa -- then we would be morally bound to try. However, this is just where the would-be moralists makes his mistake in international affairs. Such an effort exceeds even our great economic strength. Also, any program demands an acceptance on the other side unless we are to force on other people what we think is good for them. This is hardly moral. This would seem to leave only the argument that we should give such countries what they will accept and hope for the best. If so, then what about the moral implications of U.S. aid squandered and misused by small, privileged groups such as happened in Iran?

The idea of a limited commitment may become clearer through the illustration of a few of the basic rules for its implementation in Africa of the 1960's. Then, perhaps it will be seen that the idea is based not on budgetary cuts but a more mature mentality in international affairs, a mentality which by being more modest is really more ambitious.

These rules are directed at what the U.S. policy should be, for that is the only practical beginning. However, they are set within the framework of a conviction that in the eyes of Africa all of the NATO powers are lumped together, and we in this country must bear the burden of any liabilities any of our NATO allies bring with them to Africa just as we can share in any of their assets. If, as is the case at present, the liabilities seem to outweigh the assets in Africa we still can not set up an African policy independent of our commitments and obligations in other parts of the world. And, like it or not, all of Africa is very much a minor side show when compared with the importance of our NATO commitment.

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Rule Number One: Accept and Make a Virtue of the Fact that we are on the Defensive: International politics, when all is said and

done, boils down to the existence of groups of states willing to maintain things as they are or at least avoid conflict in effecting changes versus those states so dedicated to realizing certain changes they they are willing to risk, or even seek, conflict. This is not a question of "haves" versus "have-nots." Both the Soviet Union and Communist China are sufficiently well endowed in manpower and natural resources to be considered "have" nations, and the great imperialist scramble for empire in the latter decades of the 19th Century was conducted exclusively by "have" nations. It is always a simple question of defenders versus aggressors — at some periods of history the case for the defenders may not be lily white, and there may exist some explanation (if not justification) for the aggressors, but the basic fact remains constant.

Having no territorial aims nor any doctrine that we are trying to force upon others (no American statesman has claimed Western democracy or any certain economic system will "bury" the rest of the world), we can proudly claim the title of defenders. This aspect of our policy (which has not changed) was, of course, of little use to us a decade ago when Africa was in the throes of decolonization. At that time Africa wanted only to upset the status quo, and the "defenders" seemed only an obstacle in their path. Now, however, most African states are independent or have quick timetables for independence. Even in Algeria, which has not seen the last of its bloodshed, the principle is accepted.

The newly-independent African states can now respond to this appeal that they join the ranks of "defenders." They now have something in the form of independence which they would like to keep.

Of course, these new African states are not going to be induced into becoming conservative partisans of the status quo. The new ideals of rapid, revolutionary economic change, of Afro-Asian solidarity and Pan-Africanism have an emotional appeal sufficient to keep things in ferment for decades to come. Still, it is a mistake to overlook the sobering, conservative influence that comes into play immediately after a group which has been confined to the role of agitation for status from the outside gains control of a state and governmental apparatus. Witness what happened after the Iraqi revolution of 1958 (whose leaders were believed to be moving toward union with Egypt). Recall the break-up of the Mali Federation and of the United Arab Republic — groups who had the power which comes with sovereign status (no matter how small the state) resented its loss. Or note how pious resolutions for the formation of a super state seldom get implemented, e.g. the Greater Maghrib or Nkrumah's various Pan-Africa schemes.

Rule Number Two: Never Appear Overeager to Seize the Initiative in Dealing with these new African Governments: Let us take an example in the field of economic aid. The very velocity of a "crash program"

which could win kudos in this country may well have just the opposite effect in newly-independent countries. At home if a dam is built in 18 months instead of the scheduled two years, that is an achievement. The fact that, let us say, certain parts and supplies were flown in to beat the deadline adds to the glory and spectacle of the event.

However, in acting that way overseas our officials will, willy-nilly, get way out ahead of their African counter-parts. Then, in the best American tradition, the American technician will in his enthusiasm be on the phone to his African colleague in the Ministry of Economic Planning (former residence of the last colonial chief of police) wanting to know "why in hell those supplies promised for today aren't ready." In three or four months the American will be disillusioned, convinced "those fellows" are not really serious about economic planning. From that time on he is worse than useless for any work in that country.

His African opposite number will be convinced that the Americans are trying to run his country, and that they are just as bad in their own way as the arrogant colonial officials of pre-independence days. At this point the weekly one-page newspaper of the local Communist party will have no trouble providing the kind of pin-pricks needed to keep the pot boiling.

Also, in our eagerness to "get moving" we risk glossing over the domestic political scene. By moving forward on the sole criterion of economic efficiency and quick results, we may become irretrievably linked with a certain political group.

Generally speaking, in these newly-independent countries where today's leadership offers little background or experience upon which judgments and forecasts can be made and where the over-all state machinery is so shaky, it is to our advantage to keep in close touch with all groups. If, however, we announce and then try to implement overnight an ambitious program negotiated with Government X, what remains for us to do with Opposition Group Y? We are exposed to the charge (however false it may be) of having acted precipitately in order to support Government X. To continue, suppose Government X is ousted in the new election or by a coup d'etat, what do we have to offer Opposition Group Y, now in power (and while in opposition they would have labelled the American aid as imperialist, full of "strings" and "conditions")? Surely a mere pledge to continue the fine work started under the previous administration will not do. Both we and the new Government Y are hoisted with our own petards. The latter must insist on upping the ante in order to justify accepting the American aid previously condemned. This we can ill afford to do having gone all out in the enthusiasm of our first program.

A corollary of this point also militates against taking the initiative. The types of programs we will be offering to African states (technical aid, development loan fund projects, student exchanges, etc.) are the sort that remain in a perpetual state of negotiation. Unlike an extradition treaty or an international postal convention, the arrangements involve commitments which in their unfolding bring forward other possible commitments on both sides. The relationship is unavoidably one of constant negotiation.

Given such a situation it is only common sense to hold back a few attractive offers as bargaining points to meet unexpected situations or just to get over fully expected later obstacles.

At this point it is worth digressing to observe that the very concept of economic aid freely given by one state to another for no ostensible quid pro quo must stand out as somewhat freakish in the long annals of diplomatic history. Still, it is generally realized -- and more acutely in the receiving part of the world -- that aid is advanced by the giving nation for reasons (however circuitous, or erroneous) linked with its own national interest. The question in the mind of the receiver (by definition weaker, or he would not be in need of such aid from the giver) becomes, "Just what is the giver up to?" And it might be added that the degree of doubt about the gift increases in direct proportion to the absence of overt, specified conditions. In short, it is much better for all concerned if the African negotiators walk away from the table with the pleased impression of having struck a good bargain rather than filled with gnawing doubts about why they are getting a windfall.

Rule Number Three: Remember that Diplomacy in Africa, just as Elsewhere, is a multi-lateral Process: We are not alone in dealing with the newly independent African states. There are our European allies (including the former colonizing power), our opponents from the Communist bloc, the neighboring African states, not to mention other states having an important interest in certain parts of that continent such as the Arab states interested in the Islamic and Arabic-speaking parts of Africa, India with her emigrant and unassimilated populations in East and South Africa, or even Israel trying to stake out a political and economic position in parts of West Africa.

In our concern with existing power blocs, in the short-hand of day-to-day journalism, we often tend to overlook this fact of life not only in Africa, but in all parts of the world. However, it must be kept in focus in Africa, for there this very multi-lateralness becomes also something of an ideal. Before independence all of their foreign relations were necessarily bilateral -- with the colonizing power. This present position of dealing with one and all is understandably exhilarating. Of course, it may be inefficient

or even dangerous for inexperienced African states to play this diplomatic game with all comers, but it is not for us to tell them so.

We need have no fears concerning these multi-lateral relations. There is more than enough work for all. A little more reluctance to grab the lion's share of the burden, and our bargaining position will be better. Our allies will feel less suspicious, and the independent African states will be more solicitous. We must get over the mentality that a moment's hesitation means an opening for the Russians which will be fatal for all future developments. (The example of Guinea is illustrative here.) Actually, in this new African ideal of multi-lateral relations, the immediate reaction of any new government after having nailed down a working agreement with either the United States or Russia will be to seek out a balancing agreement with the other party. In this light it becomes clear that there must be situations where it is good to be in the position of the uncommitted power still being courted. This is not at all machiavellian. It is merely the obverse of what the more intelligent African leaders will be doing vis-a-vis the non-African world. As long as we remain true to our basic principles and policy, a show of skill and even a bit of cunning in our day-to-day activities will reap -- not cries of "foul" -- but genuine, and earned respect.

Rule Number Four: Give a Little Special Consideration to our Ally, the Former Colonizing Power: Most of the states where we will be expanding our activities were former colonies of Britain or France, our two major allies. It is not necessary that we follow blindly the policy of our allies in their former colonies. We quite rightly took a stand on these issues even before the colonies were independent, and we have an even greater need to take a stand now that they are independent. Still we should urge the former colonial power to assume a major role and to take the initiative in what must become more and more a common NATO policy toward the newly independent country. Just as was the case before these countries were independent it is more fitting that our objections to policies of our allies be put strongly and frankly in private counsel, but muted in public utterance.

There are some who have always worried that such restraint gives the Communist devil all the best anti-imperialist tunes. This misses the essential point. We can not have an African policy hermetically sealed off from our aims and policies in the other parts of the world. We can not lead the chorus of anti-imperialism in Africa and at the same time ask the targets of our jibes in Europe to please contribute more divisions to NATO. In fact, our case rests on being defenders (rule number one) and partisans of peaceful change and genuine self-determinism. If we insist on viewing the problem the way the Soviet Union wants us to, we have already thrown away our best cards.

In another sense we must be at least as understanding of our allies as we are prepared to be with the newly independent African

neutrals. With the latter we have taken into consideration their "anti-colonial fever" and we have accepted that this factor will shape their judgment on many issues. Yet in the European countries which have lost colonies there is often a feeling of keen frustration, an irritation for being accused of having created all the world's present ills, and a sneaking suspicion that certain friendly powers played the anti-imperialist card for their own selfish interest. Most Americans would be surprised at the number of apparently sane Englishmen and Frenchmen who sincerely believe that the United States deliberately worked to hasten decolonization in order to build up a new American Empire, operating under slightly revised ground rules. This is unfair. It is illogical, but this mentality exists.

"Empire" has always had bad connotations to us, but to our European allies it conjures up dreams --

...the sun never sets on the British Empire
 ...we are 100 million Frenchmen
 ...thin red line of heroes
 ...what do they know of England who only England know?

Now Lyautey has been removed from his grave in Morocco and re-interred in Paris. The statue of Gordon which stood in the center of Khartoum has been repatriated to England. There is an emptiness and a sensitivity in the hearts of our allies which we must take into account.

There are more practical considerations too. By virtue of their past experience the former colonizing powers are often best prepared to assist these independent states. Think of the Gezira cotton scheme in the Sudan, the first-rate network of roads in North Africa, the systems of education, public health, land tenure and taxation which exist in all of these countries, and it becomes obvious that these things (however inadequate for present needs in almost all cases) are the products of accumulated experience in which we did not share. We often have a few things to learn before we have anything to teach.

Or to take a more obvious example. A large part of independent Africa is French-speaking (in addition to their native languages) and trained in French (or Belgian) methods. We often can not be of much help here. For example, there are about 3,000 French teachers in Tunisia and about 6,000 in Morocco. We might want to help these two countries, and they might well want to reduce their reliance on the former protecting power, but the hard fact remains -- we do not speak French, and our system of education differs radically from the French.

Rule Number Five: Return to the Idea of a Small, Elite Corps in our Representation Abroad: The United States foreign service (in the broadest sense of the term, i.e. the Foreign Service, the Economic Aid Missions and the Information Service) has some of the most competent and dedicated people I have met. The government is getting a good

share of our best people for foreign service. The government is getting an even larger share of less-than-excellent people for one very simple reason. Every agency of the U.S. government dealing with foreign relations is too large, and the cream just does not reach that far down the bottle.

The impression most American Embassies in Africa leave is that of a huge, headless octopus. We are almost invariably double or triple the size of the British or French embassies, and perhaps our only chance for the future lies in the fact that many Soviet Embassies are equally large and awkward.

It is pointless to argue that one must not cut foreign representation to a level which would reduce efficiency. In dealing with foreign states what constitutes efficiency? Profits? This is inapplicable. Smooth administrative procedure, speed, the proper supplies and tools for the job, good working conditions? These are all means usually essential to any well-run business, but they may be only marginally applicable to embassies. For an embassy the only thing that matters is carrying out the aims of U.S. policy which reduces itself to the two-fold task of understanding and interpreting for Washington the local point of view and of getting across to the host country our country's point of view.

If large, heavily-staffed embassies in Africa create a bad impression (which I am convinced they do) then we must get by with smaller staffs, however inefficient this might be administratively.

The economic aid missions are the worst offenders in this problem of personnel, and some of our missions to African countries should be cut by 50% or more. Our aid missions, just like our information service and our embassies proper are part of the total U.S. diplomatic representation. Therefore, no matter what the economic arguments for more personnel in any aid mission, no new officers should be brought unless their presence would fulfill a diplomatic need (e.g. has the request for a new officer originated with the host government or merely with an ambitious officer in the U.S. aid mission?) No matter when that dam gets completed, this is the only way to integrate economic aid programs into our overall foreign policy.

The apparent success of the Peace Corps underscores this argument. The Peace Corps is an elite organization. (Let us hope it remains so.) Every successful candidate knows he has been accepted out of dozens who were turned down. This gives him pride and determination to do a good job. At the same time this policy of selectivity means that the Peace Corps need select only qualified candidates. Then, the work of the Corps takes its members into the hinterland and away from the capital cities. They are out where they can do a job which needs doing and which will be appreciated. The Peace Corps will not change the face

of Africa. It will not even affect appreciably the American diplomatic position in that continent. It will do a little bit of good, and that is most important. It is a fine example of the good-hearted but limited commitment.

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Hopefully the above arguments will do more than please those who always suspected foreign spending in any form, and repel those who welcome an expanded role for America in international affairs.

It is high time the old-fashioned conservatives stopped complaining about foreign spending, but it is also high time liberals stopped defending mistakes and poor judgment in foreign aid in a foolish attempt to maintain the pristine purity of the principle.

We are in for a long period of difficult international relations, and our role is now so important that we can not afford the boom and bust of American enthusiasm when directed to foreign affairs.

Of course, we should not leave the United Nations, but neither is it our last, best hope. The truth lies somewhere in between.

It is true that in a showdown we could not count on support from Africa (or probably Latin America), and the British would get no aid from the Afro-Asian part of the Commonwealth, but this does not mean that we should cut all commitments, draw a maginot line around NATO and let it go at that. There is important work to be done by those realistic enough to avoid trying to settle everything in the next generation.

As for Africa specifically, how many of us gave that continent a thought ten years ago? Now some are close to suggesting that developments there will make or break us. If we accept that extreme position there will be a great reaction of disillusion about ten years hence demanding we again wash our hands of the whole business.

It is very hard to get much done in such an atmosphere. Rather, let us move along at a realistic long-distance cruising speed, for ahead is a long, long road.

Sincerely,



Leon Carl Brown