

Advice for Blacks - Keep your Whites!

ADVICE TO AFRICA: KEEP YOUR WHITES

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In the opening paragraphs of his moving book, *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa*, Washington Post foreign correspondent Keith B. Richburg described standing alongside a river in Tanzania and watching a seemingly endless chain of bodies float downstream. "Sometimes they came one by one. Sometimes two or three together," Richburg wrote. "They were bloated now, horribly discolored...These were the victims of the ethnic genocide going on across the river in Rwanda. The killers were working too fast to allow for proper burials."

Richburg witnessed many horrors in Africa, bodies "stacked up like firewood in the refugee camps of Zaire, waiting to be dumped into a mass pit.... bodies lying unburied along the roadsides of Somalia, people dropping dead of starvation." He says he felt "Revulsion. Sorrow. Pity at the monumental waste of human life." One feeling came to him early; he fought against stating it, until the end of his assignment, when he was packing his bags to leave. "It was a feeling that pained me to admit, a sentiment that, when uttered aloud, might come across as callous, self-obsessed, even racist. And yet I know exactly how this feeling haunts me; I've been too embarrassed to say it. So let me drop the charade and put it as simply as I know how: There but for the grace of God go I. "

Richburg explains, "You see, I was seeing all of this horror a bit differently because of the color of my skin. I am an American, but a black man, a descendant of slaves brought from Africa. When I see these nameless, faceless, anonymous bodies washing over a waterfall or piled up on the back of trucks, what I see most is that they look like me."

Back to Savagery

They might look like Richburg, but he came to realize that they didn't think or behave like him. Of Somalia he wrote, "It's a hard, often brutal land, no place for dreamers."

Somalis will take what you've got, chew you up, and spit you right back out again. My notebooks are filled with the names and stories and quotes of people who came to help--people who flew into the darkness to bring a little bit of light--and a good many of them ended up turning coldly cynical, or being flown out wrapped in a body bag.

They were good and caring people like Valerie Place, a nurse for the Irish charity Concern. She was an endlessly cheerful woman, the kind who always finds the silver lining. I talked to her on Christmas Eve at a Concern feeding about the progress the kids were making, some of them brought back from near starvation and actually smiling and playing again. And a few weeks later, Valerie was shot dead, ambushed in her car along a deserted stretch of road."

Rwanda was worse. Richburg saw it as a country that "has reverted to prehistoric times," to a kind of sick version of Fred Flintstones's Bedrock. He asked, "Could these be fully evolved human beings carrying clubs and machetes and panga knives and smashing in their neighbors' skulls and chopping off their limbs, and piling up the legs in one pile and the arms in another, and lumping the bodies all together and sometimes forcing new victims to sit atop the heap while they clubbed them to death too? No, I realized, fully evolved human beings in the 20th century don't do things like that. Not for any reason, not tribe, not religion, not territory. These must be cavemen."

Richburg says, "Nobody knows how many were killed and wounded in Rwanda's bloodbath. Estimates range as high as a million people killed; at the very least, from the numbers unearthed in mass graves, from the skeletons found in churchyards, from the bodies found floating in the river, there were hundreds

of thousands, Tutsi mainly, but also an untold number of Hutu 'sympathizers.' The Khmer Rouge (in Cambodia) killed more perhaps, but it took them three and a half years, and most of their victims died from starvation, diseases, and forced labor. The Hutu militia accomplished as much in three months, using decidedly more low-tech methods of extermination."

But it was not just the savage butchery that shocked Richburg. He tells of a murder he covered in America where the victim's arm had been severed. He called it in to his newspaper. The night editor demanded to know which arm had been severed. "That," he said, "was Washington, D.C., where every murder victim had a name, an identity, and it mattered how they died and which limb was severed. This is Africa. These are just bodies dumped into a river. Hundreds. Thousands. No one will ever count. No one will ever try to check an identity, contact a family, find out which limb was severed. Because this is Africa, and they don't count the bodies in Africa. This is what I found the most difficult to accept and comprehend. It's not the death itself, though that is bad enough. It is the anonymity of death in Africa, the anonymity of mass death." Richburg writes, "If there was one thing I learned traveling around Africa, it was that the tribe remains the defining feature of almost every African society. Old tribal mistrusts and stereotypes linger, and the potential for a violent implosion is never very far from the surface. Even in the supposedly more sophisticated or developed countries like Kenya, thirty years of independence and 'nation building' had still failed to create any real sense of national identity that could transcend the tribe.

In Kenya.... I walked through the burned out town of Enosupukio, after it was raided by Masai warriors driving out Kikuyu who they believed had settled on traditional Masai grazing land....Not a single house or shop was left standing. Even two churches were stripped of everything except a few pews. I spoke to the Kikuyu refugees who had fled the town, they told me how the Masai who had once been their neighbors suddenly swooped down on the town with guns and machetes and spears.... And this was Kenya, a major tourist destination and a country long considered one of the more 'stable' in Africa."

Richburg's Heresy

Richburg clearly feels lucky that his ancestors came to America, even though they came as slaves. He asks, "Would I be better off if this great tragedy, this crime of slavery, had not occurred? What would my life be like now? His answer infuriated a lot of people. When he did the TV talk show circuit around publication day, nervous producers paired him with blacks who would argue "the other side of the story."

Many reviewers fell upon Richburg with flailing clubs. Robert Press of The Christian Science Monitor charged that Richburg "falls into the common trap of seeing mostly the bad while virtually ignoring the good...based as much on a one-sided, negative view of Africa as the alleged one-sided, myopic view he accuses some black American leaders of having." In The New York Times, William Finnegan complained of Richburg's "almost phobic depiction of life in Africa" and asserted that he "falls frequently into bathos and shaky surmise," writing what "grumpy ill-informed expatriates and old colonials mutter all over Africa." Trevor Coleman in the Chicago Tribune accused him of "African pessimism at its worst." One of the few favorable reviewers, Johanna Neuman of USA Today, called Out of America "the most honest book to emerge from Africa in a long time." None of the reviews we saw dealt with Richburg's "grace of God" assertion about slavery.

Richburg first signaled his feelings in a long Washington Post Magazine article in March 1996. Comments on the paper's home page got most heated. One person wrote, in fluent Ebonics, "He probably a punk and need his cap peeled...Raised in a all white hood, yo, lookin' down on the homeland and the home folks like different, or worse, BETTER." Another person wrote, "I'm burning up [expletive deleted]. Someone tell me what the point is this brother is trying to make."

Richburg does not defend slavery. He denounces it as a moral abomination. He wishes the system had never existed. He writes movingly of the inhuman pain endured by Africans wrenched from their native villages and transported, under horrible conditions, to lives of forced labor. Then he asks, "Are those who

remained better off today than those snatched up by the slavers? Anyone familiar with the brutalities that are common place in Africa today could make a case for echoing his statement, "There but for the grace of God..."

Blacks who revere what Richburg calls "the mythical Africa" have reason to feel disappointed at the sorry plight of their ancestors' homeland. Many of those who applauded the dark continent's emergence from colonialism felt that freedom would mean a better life for most. Take the prediction of Jack O'Dell, the Communist adviser of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. O'Dell said it was "quite conceivable that within little more than a generation the African continent could become a garden-spot of human civilization and culture in the modern world."

That has not happened. Tyrants hold sway over most of the continent. The Freedom House map shows nearly all Africa as "non-free." Since the heady days of the birth of self-government throughout Africa, the continent has spawned rapacious dictatorships that have brought increased oppression, corruption and economic hardship.

It is hard to conceal this unpleasant fact, but journalists keep trying. On June 29 The Washington Post ran a see-the-silver-lining article by James Rupert under the headline, "African Coups Upset March of Democracy." After cataloging violence in Sierra Leone, the Central African Republic and elsewhere, optimism got the better of Rupert. He wrote, "But alongside such dramatic setbacks, democracy in Africa is evolving in ways that are less visible but more basic, many Africans and Western observers say. Across the continent, even in countries still under authoritarian rule, people are building civil societies and raising pressure for rule by consent of the governed. Even in the capitals that have fallen under the gun this month, swelling networks of human rights committees, church groups, labor, business and professional associations have been insistently voicing popular aspirations."

Richburg disagrees. He writes, "I want to hate the dictators and believe in the brave Africans struggling for freedom. But with those rare exceptions, most Africans are not struggling; they have been too violently suppressed for too long, so many now see no other way except waiting for a big white marine in combat gear to come and rescue them from repression. I want to find heroes here among the ordinary decent Africans, but they infuriate me with their endless acquiescence to repression, their limitless tolerance, their excuses." He deplores "this maddening propensity of Africans to wallow in their own suffering, to simply roll over when kicked, and to express unswerving faith that some outside force, some divine intervention, will bring deliverance from their misery."

Our Civil Rights Leaders No Help

Richburg makes it clear that they cannot look for help to American black leaders who fought so long and hard to achieve full civil rights for blacks in America and in South Africa. "Weird things seem to happen to a lot of American black leaders when they venture into Africa," he says. "They go through a bizarre kind of metamorphosis when they set foot on the continent of their ancestors. Some of the most prominent veterans of America's civil rights wars--articulate advocates for human rights and basic freedoms for black people in America--seem to enter a kind of moral and intellectual black box when they get to Africa. Dictators are hailed as statesmen, unrepresentative governments are deemed democratic, corrupt regimes are praised for having fought off colonialism and brought about 'development.' Black Americans were most vocally at the forefront of calls for immediate democratic reform in South Africa, but when the subject turns to the lack of democracy and human rights elsewhere in Africa, those same black Americans become defensive, nervous and inarticulate."

Richburg cites the example of Douglas Wilder, Virginia's first black governor since Reconstruction. When he asked Wilder what could be done to promote democracy in Africa, he got this reply: "We cannot and should not force them to undergo a metamorphosis in seconds. If they are on track and on the path and giving evidence of trying to adjust, then our job is not to interfere and to understand that there is a

difference from what they are accustomed to." Richburg comments that if a white governor of a southern state had made such a statement about South Africa during the struggle to end apartheid, he would probably have been branded a racist "and probably by no less a personage than Doug Wilder." The Reverend Louis Sullivan, author of the Sullivan Principles that were used to bring pressure on South Africa, told Richburg, "We must be on the side of human rights and democracy. Many African leaders recognize it must be done and are trying to find a way to bring it about. I don't like to see anything stringent from America, saying you must do this or you must do that."

The Hypocrisy of Our Black Leaders

This hypocrisy of American blacks in condoning brutal behavior by dictators is galling to Richburg. In 1994, Human Rights Watch/Africa denounced Sudan as "abysmal," citing persecution of blacks and Christians in the south, including the bombing of villages, enslavement of black Christians by the Muslim majority, and forced removal of political foes to isolated desert camps. Richburg interviewed the country's strong man, Hussan Turabi. He writes, "I sat there as Hussan Turabi, the architect of much of the terror, a man responsible for fueling a brutal war against black Africans in the south, lectured me about the history of oppression of blacks in America. Let's talk about the oppression of blacks in south Sudan, I wanted to ask him, Tell me about all the hands and feet that have been chopped off under sharia law...."

Back at his hotel Richburg encountered black Americans "being given VIP treatment by the Sudanese regime. Some of the men had dressed for the part, in flowing white African robes and white turbans wrapped around their heads..." The next day he read of how the delegation had berated U.S. ambassador Donald Petterson about U.S. policy towards Sudan. They had been treated with the "utmost courtesy" by the government and "found the dusty streets of this capital safer than those of most crime-ridden American cities." The experience left Richburg "shaking with rage."

Colonialism Not To Blame

Richburg, who covered Southeast Asia before going to Africa for the Washington Post, does not buy the notion that Africa can blame its present predicament on its colonial past. "Talk to me about Africa's legacy of European colonialism," he writes, "and I'll give you Malaysia and Singapore, ruled by the British and occupied by Japan during World War II. Or Indonesia, exploited by the Dutch for over 300 years. And let's toss in Vietnam, a French colony later divided between North and South, with famously tragic consequences. Like Africa, most Asian countries only achieved true independence in the postwar years; unlike the Africans, the Asians knew what to do with it." Instead of Vietnam, which has been anything but a shining city on a hill, Richburg should have tossed in Hong Kong. A crowded city with no natural resources except its port, it became a trading and manufacturing powerhouse as a British colony. When the British returned Hong Kong to China on June 30, 1997, its per capita GDP was very nearly equal to that of the United States. He did bring up South Korea, pointing out that "when Ghana gained its independence from Britain in 1957, it was one of the brightest hopes of black Africa, with a higher gross national product than South Korea." Ghana had been called the Gold Coast because of its mineral wealth. South Korea, poor in natural resources, devastated by the North Korean invasion in 1950 and burdened with a large and costly military force ever since, has emerged as an economic powerhouse, exporting its sophisticated industrial products throughout the world. Richburg comments, "Ghana, meanwhile, has slid backward. Its gross national product today is lower than it was at independence.... the economy is propped up by foreign aid."

What has hurt Ghana and nearly every other black African country is a succession of corrupt rulers who were more interested in amassing personal fortunes than in advancing the welfare of their people. All too often, their policies were guided by socialist mythology and racism. "It's an ugly truth," Richburg says, "but it needs to be laid out here, because for too long now Africa's failings have been hidden behind a veil of excuses and apologies.... Corruption is the cancer eating at the heart of the African state. It is what

sustains Africa's strongmen in power, and the money they pilfer, when spread generously throughout the system, is what allows them to continue to command allegiance long after their last shreds of legitimacy are gone."

The point that Richburg makes that grates on blacks is that Africans brought many of these woes on themselves, through market-destructive economic policies and dictatorial governments more intent on booty than the public weal. According to the 1997 Index of Economic Freedom, a joint study by The Heritage Foundation and The Wall Street Journal, "As a whole, sub-Saharan Africa remains the most economically unfree, and by far the poorest, area in the world. Of the 38 sub-Saharan African countries graded, none received a grade of free...Of the 19 countries [world-wide] categorized as repressed, the majority are in sub-Saharan Africa." The 1997 study "demonstrates quite clearly that sub-Saharan Africa's policy is not the result of insufficient levels of foreign aid, weather patterns, or internal strife; on a per-capita basis, many sub-Saharan African countries are among those receiving the highest levels of economic assistance in the world. Rather, the main cause of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa is a lack of economic freedom, embodied in the policies these nations have imposed on themselves."

Richburg notes that Africa's share of world exports has fallen by half since the 1970s. The dollar value of its total trade fell in the 1980s. Imports from Africa account for less than 0.10 percent of total United States imports. Life expectancy is the lowest in the world. More African children die before the age of 5 than anywhere else and fewer grow up to live beyond the age of 50.

Corruption is rife in Asia as well as Africa, but Richburg, who has covered both areas, sees it as far more pervasive in Africa. He says that Mobutu, the recently deposed dictator of Zaire, recently renamed the Congo, is estimated to have stashed as much as \$10 billion in overseas bank accounts, but the corruption there extends from top to bottom.

Zaire's neighbor, Zimbabwe has had greater success than most of black-ruled Africa in avoiding what Richburg calls "that most common of the continent's ritualistic dances, the African Downhill Slide. He says that it "has something to do with a piece of advice that Mozambican president Samora Machel gave to Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe's president) well before independence. Machel told him simply, "Keep your whites."

Machel, a Marxist, was speaking from sad experience. Richburg comments that most blacks would probably rather not hear this bit of advice, but Mugabe tried to follow it until recently. "I'm Talking About America Too"

Richburg says "the reluctance to talk straight about Africa" is a great disservice. "If I sound tired of all the old excuses," he writes, "it may be because I've heard so many of them before...And I'm not just talking about Africa here--I'm talking about America too. Ever try to have a meaningful conversation in America about the problems of the black underclass? About drug abuse and teenage pregnancy in black neighborhoods? About the breakdown of the black family, the school dropout rates, the spiraling black-on-black crime? Daniel Patrick Moynihan tried, a long time ago, before he was a senator, when he warned about the disintegration of black families. And did he get trounced--branded a racist and worse. But go back and look at what he said; sounds to me like Pat had that one just about right, and way before such talk was fashionable."

Blacks don't like to talk about these things among themselves, Richburg tells us. He says he tries to discuss them when he returns to Detroit for family holiday gatherings. "I hear all about Jim Crow and legal segregation and unfair housing practices and all the rest. I hear a lot of excuses, but not much more--and what I hear is mostly backward-looking, not inward looking." He tells of one such family discussion in which he mentioned a friend of his, a Vietnamese girl who arrived in this country in 1975 at age nine, with no English and little money and who now has a master's degree from a good university and a good job with a big company. Why, he asked his relatives, can an immigrant kid with such handicaps do so

well "when so many blacks are still struggling on the streets, hustling, just trying to make ends meet?" After a long silence, his straight-talking father provided an answer: "Because those folks you see out there on the streets think the white man owes them something. They're still waiting for that twenty acres and a mule."

Richburg comments, "Black African leaders talk about foreign aid as if they're entitled to it--it's something that is due to Africa, with no strings attached--the same way many American blacks see government assistance programs as a kind of entitlement of birth. In both cases, you're left with black people wallowing in a safety net of dependency."

The Conspiracy Of Silence

He says that there may be a conspiracy that keeps black people down. "Only it's not the conspiracy they're probably thinking of.... What I'm talking about is the grand conspiracy of silence, a collective willingness of white people in the West to bury their heads when the talk turns to Africa. It's so pervasive that even the word 'tribe' gives some white people the jitters because they think it's racially laden, condescending.... But then, how can Americans talk straight about Africa when we still can't talk straight about race among ourselves."

This brings into sharp focus the import of Richburg's book: Regardless of the brutalities endured by their slave ancestors, are American blacks living in more freedom and comfort today than the people in their ancestral homelands? Here is Richburg's answer.

"But while I know that 'Afrocentrism' has become fashionable for many black Americans search for identity, I know it cannot work for me. I have been here, I have lived here and seen Africa in all its horror. I know now that I am a stranger here. I am an American, a black American, and I feel no connection to this strange and violent place. You see? I just wrote 'black American.' I couldn't even bring myself to write 'African-American'.... Is that what we really are? Is there anything really 'African' left in the descendants of those original slaves who made that torturous journey across the Atlantic?"

Those Lucky Descendants of Slaves

Richburg continues, "Had my ancestor not made it out of here, I might have ended up there in that crowd, smiling gleefully, while a man with a cleaver cuts off the hands of a thief. Or maybe I would have been one of those bodies, arms and legs bound together, washing over the waterfall in Tanzania.... Or I would be limping now from the torture I received in some rancid police cell. And then maybe I would be thinking: How lucky those black Americans are."

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