

A View of Rome from the Provinces

by *Allister Sparks*

The American scholar spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. “Not since Rome,” he said, “has a single power so dominated the world—militarily, economically, culturally; in science, in the arts, in education.” Around the Washington seminar table, sage heads nodded. It was not a statement uttered with boastful intent. It was spoken, and received by the audience, as an expression of self-evident truth.

Objectively assessed, the statement is probably true. American dominance in the world is indeed extraordinary. Yet, as the only foreigner in the room, I bristled. There is a disturbing whiff of hubris about such an assured assumption of one’s own superiority. I made some crack about how good it was to come from the provinces to Rome to sit at the feet of the patricians, but I fear the irony passed unnoticed. The American self-image of a mighty power that is also a benign hegemon, the global custodian of democratic values and human rights, is deeply rooted. There is genuine bewilderment at the fact that the United States is not universally admired but is, rather, often seen as domineering and manipulative.

Much of the hostility, of course, stems from envy. It has been the lot of the rich through the ages to be resented by the poor, and Africa, being the poorest of the poor, has more than its share of this resentment. But it is more accurate to speak of a love-hate relationship, for in Africa, as elsewhere, America’s pop music and culture, its movies and television, its fashions and its fast-food restaurants are pervasive, even as the resentment of cultural invasiveness smolders. Developing countries want direct U.S. investment to build their economies, but the transnational corporations that make the investments are targeted as symbols of economic imperialism. The United States is criticized for not being more directly involved in humanitarian interventions, especially in Africa, but if it does get involved, it is accused of being hegemonic.

Ironically, my own country, South Africa, which shares in this love-hate relationship with the United States, is also caught in a Catch-22 in its relationship with the rest of the African continent. In regional terms, it is the most advanced democracy and something of a superpower, accounting for 40 percent of sub-Saharan Africa’s total gross domestic product. For decades, African states longed for the day when South Africa would be liberated from its status as the apartheid pariah and become the economic engine that would pull Africa out of its mire of poverty and underdevelopment, much as Japan did for the Pacific Rim. But now that South Africa is free and democratic, there is acute resentment of its busi-



A crowd surges toward President Bill Clinton in Accra, Ghana, during his 1998 African tour.

nessmen as they thrust northward, and its political leaders are almost obsessively cautious not to appear to be throwing their weight around.

Like America in the world at large, South Africa has the power, but fearful of being called domineering, it winds up being accused of failing to provide leadership. It, too, is reluctant to join peacekeeping missions in Africa. “It’s an exact analogy,” says Gregory Mills, director of the South African Institute of International Affairs. “We’re both damned if we do and damned if we don’t.”

South Africa’s love-hate relationship with the United States has moved through cycles over the years. The United States has long been a reference point for black South Africans, who have not only identified with the civil rights struggle of African Americans but at times looked to them for salvation, even as they resented what they perceived to be Washington’s de facto support for white minority rule in South Africa. For their part, white South Africans, who still dominate the economy, admire the dynamism of American capitalism and have historically shared the American abhorrence of communism. Nevertheless, they have a faintly derogatory attitude toward the United States, inherited from their European past.

During the 1920s, Marcus Garvey’s back-to-Africa movement ignited an apocalyptic expectation among black South Africans that their liberation was at hand. Word spread that Garvey, who had formed his Black Star shipping line to transport African Americans to Africa, was sending a fleet to liberate South Africa and establish a black republic. *AmaMelika ayeza* (“The Americans are coming”) was initially a rumor and then a slogan that sparked a political awakening with the for-

mation of a militant black labor movement under a man named Clemens Kadalie.

When I first came to Johannesburg, in the 1950s, the pullulating black townships around the gold-mining city evinced an identification with what these newly urbanized folk imagined was the racier side of American life. Crime gangs arose, with names like “the Americans” and “the Berliners” and larger-than-life leaders who affected what they imagined was an American lifestyle. America, the land of Jesse Owens and Joe Louis, was perceived as the place where the black man was free, or at least where he was a man of the city, of the Big Time—with a big car, racy speech, and flashy suits.

Later, after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, the banning of the African National Congress (ANC), and the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela, this romantic vision faded. It was replaced by a more hard-nosed identification with the Soviet Union when the West generally failed to support the ANC exiles, and only the socialist countries (including those in Scandinavia) gave them sanctuary and material aid. The intellectual influence of this support base; continued racism in the United States; a perception, particularly during the Reagan years, that Washington was a covert supporter of the apartheid status quo; America’s shift away from its traditional liberalism; and the emergence of a tougher, more grasping form of capitalism all combined to make *capitalism* itself a pejorative word and the United States something of an ogre. “Reagan and his ‘constructive engagement’ policy made us very angry,” says Nthato Motlana, Mandela’s lifelong friend and adviser. “He seemed to support all the worst dictators in the world. We just hated Americans at that time.”

That perception softened considerably in the late 1980s with the surge of public support for the anti-apartheid cause in America. Congress overrode President Reagan’s veto of sanctions against South Africa, and U.S. economic pressure proved decisive in forcing the apartheid regime to the negotiating table. Then came the collapse of the Soviet empire, at the very moment the ANC triumphantly assumed power after its long and arduous liberation struggle.

The end of the bipolar world has brought a new ambiguity. The ANC is nothing if not pragmatic, so it recognizes America’s supreme importance—Mandela’s first trip abroad was to the United States, where he was lionized and given the honor of being one of the few foreign heads of state to address Congress. But with the end of bipolar competition, the Third World generally and Africa in particular find themselves increasingly on the margins of world affairs and even forgotten.

There is also a sense that the United States has become more arrogant and isolationist. The legacy of the Reagan years and the winning of the Cold War, most black South Africans believe, have produced a sea change in the American ethos. There has been a dwindling of the idealistic spirit that inspired the Peace Corps, a discrediting of liberalism, a persistent dominance

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in foreign policy of the “national interest” over “humanitarian interests” — likely to be more pronounced under President George W. Bush — and an attitude in domestic policy that in the land of opportunity the poor, who are disproportionately black, are to blame for their own misery. “I visit the U.S. often and I have to say that Martin Luther King’s dream has not been realized,” says Motlana. “Many African Americans still live in wretched conditions, and you wonder why a country as well endowed as the U.S. allows that to happen. The African Americans I meet are very bitter about the American system. Their anger is much greater than that of the black South Africans.”

Bill Clinton introduced more ambiguity into the U.S.-African relationship. Admittedly, he paid more attention to Africa than did any previous U.S. president. Soon after his inauguration, he held an unprecedented event, the White House Conference on Africa; he organized the first-ever United States–Africa ministerial meeting, attended by representatives of 50 countries in 1999; he paid two visits to the continent; he addressed the South African Parliament; he developed a close personal relationship with Mandela; and he sent a stream of cabinet delegations to Africa, at the rate of about one every two months. But he did not match his words and gestures with action.

Africa’s crises multiplied during the Clinton years, yet the administration did little to prevent or alleviate them other than provide some token funding for peace-keeping forces. It took no action to stop the Rwanda genocide or the appalling atrocities in Sierra Leone. In Liberia, the nearest thing the United States has to an ex-colony in Africa, it brought no meaningful pressure to bear on the evil Charles Taylor to stop him from sending aid to Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front or to stay his hand in the looting of “blood” diamonds. It also supported a deal that brought Sierra Leone’s psychopathic Foday Sankoh, leader of the Front, into a “government of national unity” and gave him control of the country’s mineral resources, even as Sankoh’s men were drugging child soldiers and chopping off the hands and feet of ordinary citizens.

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There have been no U.S. initiatives on the continuing conflicts in Angola, where Washington’s onetime client, Jonas Savimbi, is the key problem figure, or in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which continues to suffer after the horrendous reign of another ex-client, Mobutu Sese Seko. Other crises have smoldered unattended in the Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, and Sudan. Meanwhile, new crises loom in Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Ivory Coast, three key states that, until now, have been regarded as pillars of stability.

It seems clear that after the 1993 military debacle in Somalia, which left 18 American soldiers dead, the United States will not soon use armed intervention again in Africa. Yet it has intervened in Kosovo and Bosnia, and would doubtless be willing to do so again in the Middle East. The rationale is that U.S. national interests are at stake in those regions, but to Africans the

choice looks more like racial discrimination. A recent study by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) shows that U.S. companies have larger investments in Africa (more than \$15 billion) than in either the Middle East or eastern Europe. America's total trade with Africa (about \$20 billion annually) exceeds that with all former communist states, including Russia. Africa, moreover, is one of the world's most active areas of oil and gas development. Fifteen percent of U.S. oil imports now come from Africa (mostly Nigeria and Angola), and the figure will increase to more than 20 percent over the next four years.

What is more difficult to understand is that even while the Clinton administration was making such a show of attention to Africa, the staffing of the State Department's Africa Bureau was run down, many key U.S. embassies in Africa were left understaffed, and more than a dozen U.S. Agency for International Development missions in Africa were closed. As the CSIS study noted: "Large stretches of the continent—particularly areas suffering acute conflict—are no longer covered by on-site diplomatic personnel."

Another matter that raises concern in these distant provinces of the empire is the growing U.S. scorn for the emerging framework of international organizations and the trend toward greater American unilateralism. While maintaining its self-image as the global custodian of human rights, the United States took 40 years to ratify the 1948 Genocide Convention, and it remains one of the few countries that have failed to ratify the Landmines Agreement, the International Covenant on the Rights of Children, or the Rome Treaty establishing an international criminal court for human rights. Washington and Belgrade were the only two capitals that refused to participate in the proceedings of the Independent International Commission on Kosovo, which has investigated the war in that region.

"There is a schizophrenia here," says Richard Goldstone, the South African judge who cochairs the commission. "Americans believe in these institutions, they want to see international criminals prosecuted, but they don't want to open themselves to the process. I think they fear that the institutions will be used against them politically, but it is perceived as arrogance, as though they regard themselves as above scrutiny."

There are allegations of arrogance and hypocrisy in matters of trade too. The United States, which initially developed its own economy behind high tariff walls, insists that developing countries remove protectionist barriers, to the huge advantage of U.S. exporters. Yet opposition to increasing America's imports of African textiles from a paltry 0.8 percent of all textile imports to 1.6 percent stalled the African Growth and Opportunity Act in Congress for more than a year.

Finally, of course, there is the matter of The Election, a source of much hilarity and jesting on the part of us provincials, who must subject our own electoral processes to the scrutiny of outside observer teams, and ultimately to the judgment of the United States, if we are to receive a stamp of democratic acceptability. Romulus in his feasts in honor of Neptune, so runs the legend, introduced the most ancient of all Roman spectacles, the circus. Al Gore and George W. Bush, it would seem, have revived the tradition. □