

At the Otsego County Fair

D. E. STEWARD

WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON, the fulminating old abolitionist who spent his life (1805-1879) railing against slavery in the American South, wrote in *The Liberator*, his abolitionist journal:

Nothing can take precedence of the question of liberty. No interest is so momentous as that which involves "the life of the soul;" no object so glorious as the restoration of a man to himself.

I decided to try to find if this concern for "the life of the soul" was still around in America, and more specifically to see if its penumbral glow touches as far as South Africa in the American consciousness.

A county fair in the bucolic dairylands of New York State was my opinion laboratory, quite a good and representative place to try to find out how Americans are liable to react when they wake up some morning to find South Africa as the world's number one international crisis. Generally the results were as suprising as many of the people with whom I talked.

As I wandered through the lanes of exhibits and into the stock barns I accosted every alert face I passed. So my sampling was not completely random but neither was it loaded, since the dusty site of a county fair is far from either city or university and so is not the sort of place to look for concentrated internationalism in America.

A pleasant afternoon at the Otsego County Fair is simply America at its most basic level, neither dynamic nor well informed, but quite a reasonable place to look for anything. I even found three people who actually have been or are about to go to Africa. And only one person refused to answer my questions, a Protestant minister whose chin wavered when I first mentioned the phrase "civil rights."

I ASKED EVERYONE I interviewed six questions and allowed them to talk on as much as they would on each. Questions one, two and three led them up to the fourth question which was: "Should the United States do all it can to guarantee human rights for all people everywhere?" Then I asked, "What do you know about South Africa?" Most said they knew nothing. Then I went

on to tell them something like, "South Africa is a country where only one out of five people is white. The whites completely dominate the rest of the population. Only the whites have any rights." My sixth and final question dealt with the United States and South Africa directly.

It would be the most absurd folly to suggest that the results of my experiment reveal the future direction of United States policy toward South Africa, yet still America is a place where public opinion is the politician's whitest sacred cow, and where even in the halls of the State Department, and more especially on the banks of the Pedernales, that cow's shadow is always omnipresent. Whatever may be deduced from them, the things these few people at the Otsego County Fair had to say about liberty and "the life of the soul" go into the mix with all the other question marks, imponderables and the few apparent inevitabilities which loom in the future of South Africa.

Other than the militant racist, of which there may very well have been none in this small Northern crowd, Americans fall into two groups when they think about race. They may be like the young man who immediately informed me that he was a Cornell University graduate and now in "sales" with Humble Oil. When I asked him my third question ("should Negroes have full political, social and economic rights in this country?"), he answered, "They should but it will always be equal but separate. It will always be that way." Or they may be like the patently liberal housewife from the New York suburbs — later who interrupted our conversation repeatedly to ask me for the names of books on Africa — who answered question number three with an emphatic "yes" and added, "and of course I mean miscegenation too."

BUT THE FUTURE DIRECTION of racial problems in America is already plotted; racism with the sanctions and supports of society behind it is already a closed book here. So there could be nothing very surprising about any of the answers I got to my third question. What was encouraging was that a great many people, many more than half of those I talked with, felt that America has some sort of duty to "guarantee

human rights for all people everywhere," my fourth question.

A retired steel worker from Pennsylvania answered this fourth question with a loud, "absolutely," pounding his fist on his thigh. A candid politician, the State Assemblyman representing the district in the State Capitol in Albany, a Republican, answered a simple, "sure." A young man who will be teaching for the Peace Corps in Uganda before the year is out said "of course." A magistrate's wife from New Jersey, who told me her only big concern was air pollution, answered a flat, unequivocal "yes." A local cheese plant worker in his forties states, "People should have rights; we must help them if we can."

The few negative replies to the fourth question were typified by the fat young man from Long Island (a New York suburb) with a baby in his arms who said, "that's ticklish" (nearly everything seemed to be a "ticklish" question to him) and by the expansive Negro civil servant who works in New York's City Hall, who said we should, "clean up our own back yard first."

The only people who knew anything at all about South Africa were a man in a baseball cap who said he was in "purchasing" for Socony Vacuum Oil Company, and a middle-aged woman physician, lean and aristocratic in her Bermuda shorts. The man in the baseball cap said he travelled "everywhere" with his job and that "less than a year ago" he had been in "Johannesburg, Durban and oh yes, Cape Town" for a very few days. But apparently he had been there long enough to have become attuned to the hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil mentality which is necessary in order to survive in the Republic. He would say nothing more at all about South Africa.

But the woman doctor was refreshingly loquacious as she chatted on about her recent trip to visit her brother, who is the United States Ambassador to the Congo. From Leopoldville she had travelled to Kivu and Katanga and she had many intelligent observations about her trip. She was also fully aware of the implications of South Africa and assured me that she had "read Paton." Her young daughter and a niece were standing nearby with a French girl of the same age who was visiting them

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for the summer. Through our conversation the doctor spoke to the French girl in occasional asides of perfect French. As I said goodbye to all of them, the other two girls both assured me that they had also "read Paton" in school.

The young man who will soon teach in Uganda had just graduated in "history," but he knew virtually nothing about South Africa. He assured me that he would probably learn something about it during his Peace Corps training period.

TO ALL THESE PEOPLE and many more I addressed my final question: "Do you think our government should do everything it can to help change the situation in South Africa?"

Most answered yes, short of military intervention. Many qualified their answer by saying we should act only through the United Nations. And virtually all had some parallel comment on Vietnam at this point, such as the Negro civil servant who said that we had to be careful with such things because "we are losing now in Vietnam because we've over-extended ourselves." Only one, the magistrate's wife, mentioned the possibility of a future South African crisis having direct implications in the Cold War. Most, like the State Assemblyman, thought of the question in what he describes as "altruistic terms," and said that of course it would have to depend on what the situation was when it developed. Only one, the retired steel worker, said that we should do something about South Africa immediately. Over and over again he said, "There's just too much trampling on other people in this world and we have to stop it, just too much trampling..."

Only two people interviewed gave a flat no to the last question. One, a pleasant dyed blonde with four young children in tow who had "lived in Texas," said, "People in this country need help first, in Kentucky for example..." The other, a middle-aged "machine operator" with a very Polish face and frizzed hair, said she "wouldn't interfere."

Perhaps the most typical answer to this question of whether America should try to help the disenfranchised in South Africa came from the mild, polite cheese plant worker. This lean countryman thought for a few seconds when I asked the question and then responded with a simple, "Yes."

IF THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS were to sit at the Otsego County Fair when the inequities in South Africa become front-page news here, there is not much doubt that it would move to act on the side of amelioration, probably through the agencies of the United Nations. This, at least, is a hopeful omen for the future.

Ironically I realised after my long afternoon of interviews that nearly every fragment of conversation had been carried on in terms like "freedom" and "human rights" which most South Africans do not even dare admit to their vocabularies. Liberty and "the life of the soul" have a long way to go.

As Doctor Yutar said during the recent trial of ex-prison warder van Schalkwyk:

"The shouts of agony and pain which van Schalkwyk reported hearing had not come from the room

where an electronic therapeutic machine was housed, but

from the room next door

where Corporal punishment

was being administered under the supervision of the district surgeon..."

So much for these foul allegations of brutality in South African prisons!



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