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Colonialism in Africa

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June 15, 1955

COLONIALISM: FRONTIER OF FREEDOM

A Mau Mau tribesman in a remote village of Kenya takes a blood oath of enmity against the whites. In Casablanca a crude bomb is tossed into a native coffee shop; when the smoke clears several officials of the French Moroccan government lie sprawled on the floor. Almost daily isolated incidents of violence are reported in press dispatches from African cities.

These irresponsible acts are the crude stirrings of deep currents of discontent and revolt. Deplorable as they may be, they are a timely warning to the nations of the west to deal with the vestiges of colonialism and to deal with them promptly.

There is little disagreement among the free nations that colonialism must go. Since the end of World War II, half a billion people have achieved independence. The principle of progressive development of self-government is set forth in the United Nations Charter. It was upheld by President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Churchill in a joint statement called the Potomac Charter, issued in the summer of 1954. It was reaffirmed in the Pacific Charter sponsored by seven nations at the Manila Conference last September.

The colonial problem today, for practical purposes, is the problem of Africa. It involves some 150 million human beings. In various stages of development, from the most primitive to the advanced, they are ruled for the most part by the French, the British, the Belgians and the Portuguese.

The backbone of the problem is not will these people achieve self-government but when and under what circumstances. It is a question of preparation and timing. The colonial people could break out of their state of dependency in violence and in hatred only to be submerged in the oppression of communism or some other totalitarianism. Or they could move, in cooperation and in peace, into the ranks of the free nations.

The course they take depends heavily on themselves and their European rulers. It will be influenced, however, by the politics of the United Nations and this country. We have no holdings but we have interests in Africa. There are strategic airfields in North Africa. Raw materials, including uranium, flow to us from African ports. Newly independent nations watch closely the stand we take on issues involving colonialism. Most important, our long-range national interests require that the peoples of Africa develop their natural resources and gravitate not towards totalitarianism but towards free institutions and towards peace.

There are steps which we can take to encourage an evolution of the African colonies in that direction. We can urge the colonial powers to intensify their efforts to develop the basis for self-government in their dependencies and to set up and speed up the timetables. We can join with others in strengthening the United Nations trusteeship system. At present, only 9 territories, inherited from the losers of past wars,

have been brought under this form of international supervision; others may be susceptible to the same treatment. We can encourage former dependencies to help in dealing with the problems of evolving self-government in Africa. Countries like India, Ceylon, Pakistan and the Philippines know first-hand the advantages, as well as the difficulties, which go with independence. Their assistance in preparing the Africans for self-government should be invaluable. Finally, this country through its exchange-of-persons programs can play an important part in the training of African personnel for the technical and administrative tasks of self-government. A devoted body of men and women to carry on these tasks is essential if self-government is to have substance and stability.

It is easy, of course, for this country to stand on the sidelines and offer advice to the European powers. If that is all we do, they can hardly be blamed for ignoring it. In our common interest, it seems to me essential that we understand whatever reluctances they have in this matter and assist in overcoming them. The reluctances are largely those of tradition and economics. Substantial numbers of Europeans have for generations been devoting their lives to Africa. Thousands of them, for example, are settled in North Africa, Kenya and the Congo. Many staff the military and civilian functions of the colonial governments. Furthermore, over the years the economies of the colonies have been tied closely to the metropolitan countries.

The Europeans will not be anxious to cooperate in dissolving their special positions and their special responsibilities without a satisfactory alternative. Fortunately there may be one. Progress towards self-government in Africa can be matched by dynamic economic and social development in which Western Europe must play a leading role. As it is now, the human and material resources of the colonial areas are largely untapped because of the closed-door economic and political systems which generally prevail. The entire world would stand to benefit if these doors were opened.

Leadership for an attack on this problem must come from Africa and Europe but in large-scale investment, technical aid and other appropriate ways, this country and others have much to contribute.

The rumblings in the colonial areas of Africa should disturb us deeply. But we can quiet these rumblings if we have the courage and the honesty to recognize that they herald an upsurge of power in Africa that can be channelled into constructive as well as destructive ends. Colonialism is in every sense a frontier of freedom. It is a challenge to the free nations to act in concert and to act in accordance with the tenets of freedom.