

France and Britain demand new imperial rule in Africa

by Christine Bierre

“Only a programme of ‘enlightened re-imperialism’ for Europe can put right the bloody mess made of its former colonies in Africa,” was the subtitle of a double-banner headlined commentary in the London *Observer* on Aug. 18, a demand that has now become a drumbeat in the British and French press.

The author is Norman Stone, evidently an historian, who opines, under the slogan “Why the Empire Must Strike Back,” that European colonialism in Africa ended prematurely and must be returned by an international mandate. He writes: “Liberian massacres have become so commonplace as not even to rate a casual news item. Somalia is a continuing mess, worsened by the absurd recent international antics to rescue it. No one seems to have any idea what might be done about Rwanda and Burundi, where the massacres go on.” He praises France: “The French did not abandon their empire as thoroughly as we did. Their troops are present to maintain order. . . .” Hence, it is argued by Stone, “re-imperialism now begins to make sense again, and the Europeans would be in a good position to push through some sort of international mandate. . . . Now, with much of Africa a bloody mess, we are back to where we were before ‘the Scramble of Africa’ got under way in the 1880s, but with the difference that the rivalries between the various powers would not take the same proportions as before. . . .”

“A hundred years ago, it would have seemed obvious to well-intentioned observers of the African scene that an international mandate should be given to civilised states to intervene in the maintenance of order. What the French have done, with conspicuous success, in their own former African colonies could be done by other European states. Empires do not have to be formal or tyrannical. . . . There are times when they do good, and the post-independence history of Africa shows that this is one of them.”

The precise formulations have been echoed across the Channel in the French press. France’s May military intervention in support of the Central African Republic regime of Ange Patassé became the occasion for French officials to openly, shamelessly, raise the question as to whether whole parts of Africa should not be “placed in trusteeship,” or even if a return to colonial empires in Africa were not necessary.

Characteristic of this line of thinking, voiced among strategic circles in the wealthy countries for some time now, especially since the 1990 Gulf war, was the commentary of

Col. Jean-Louis Dufour, entitled, “Africa: Return to Protectorate Status?” in *Le Figaro* on May 26, 1996. Dufour not only does not denounce the armed intervention on behalf of Patassé, with 1,300 French troops stationed in the C.A.R., quite the opposite: He waxes indignant over how slow Paris was to launch it! This delay, he complains, meant the looting of the capital’s downtown by rioters and the destruction of public buildings in a country already quite poor.

What action would be more effective in the future? The very terms Dufour uses to pose the debate, show how advanced the interventionist theses have become. Dufour acknowledges that it is “delicate” for France to “seriously administer an independent state” any better, even when its President “was elected under the auspices and with the active help of the French Army, which lent its aircraft, trucks, and manpower in 1993, so that a sovereign people might express its choice without hindrance”! France is “hesitating” again, he complains, “to rigorously exercise” what is, for it, “an indispensable guardianship.”

Dufour then proceeds to propose the erection of a new empire with a human face, exercising its guardianship under the auspices of the United Nations. “In Africa, Europe, spurred on by the United Nations, should feel concerned. The colonial experience of these states, as well as history and reason, ought to spur the European Union to take charge of such and such a territory, whose only masters are decidedly buffoons, or whose only law is that of the potentate of the moment. The guardianship should last as long as necessary, duly figured by the General Assembly of the United Nations, until the inhabitants of the country under consideration were judged capable of ‘managing their own affairs’ ”

On the same subject, the London *Daily Telegraph* specifies, in an article on “The Second Empire,” what form this might take in Africa today. France, says the author, no longer has the means to pay for an intervention every three months, as it has had to up to now, “a total of 17 military interventions over five years, in countries ranging from Chad to Cameroon, from Togo to the Comoros and Zaire,” and to support 8,000 men stationed in a dozen former colonies, as well as military assistance accords with 30-odd countries around the world. The solution, according to the *Daily Telegraph*, lies partially in the military reorganization under way, which will permit France to have a professional army for “projecting itself” into

faraway theaters, capable of making rapid and less costly interventions than maintaining legionnaires in the four corners of the world.

Ultimately, Paris and London are working to get an African intervention force up on its feet, centered on the Organization for Africa Unity, capable of deploying under the direction of international institutions, instead of Western ones (see accompanying article).

Not shocking, really

This tendency toward the reconstitution of empires did not begin yesterday. For several years, quietly, almost imperceptibly, strategists, political ideologues, and other geopoliticians in the pay of powerful financier oligarchies, have been laying both the ideological and administrative bases for the advent of this new empire. That is the great merit of a recent work by Ghassam Salamé, *Les Appels d'Empires (Calls for Empire)*, which traces this evolution, giving an extensive bibliography on the subject.

The Gulf war, which lifted the taboo against neo-colonial interventions in the South, and the end of the bipolar world which no longer permits Third World countries to seek the protection of one bloc from the other, are among the causes that Salamé cites to explain this new infatuation with empires. Not a day passes without hearing, whether from the far reaches of “the South” or from the heart of “the wealthy countries,” calls for empire. And Salamé gives several examples: “An Asian head of state who demands of a French ambassador: ‘We want to be recolonized.’ ” The President of Gambia, who, overthrown by a coup d’état, demands, à la Aristide, his right to be restored to his functions by the international community, or even, the prime minister of the Comoros, who calls on France to put down the rebellion of mercenaries and restore him to power.

When the Third World leaders aren’t calling on the northern powers for help, then the rich countries themselves put out the calls for empire. Salamé recaps then-British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd’s positions, favoring an “imperial role” for the UN, in the *Independent* on Sept. 19, 1992. The world institution would replace the old colonial powers such as the United States, which no longer has the means and does not want to be the “world’s policeman” except in selective cases. Hurd envisaged this remedy, “the most radical of all,” especially for various African countries stricken with the most serious ills: “uncontrolled demographic explosion, collapse of the state apparatus, systematic kleptomania by the leaders, tribal massacres, epidemics.”

Salamé also mentions the case of William Pfaff, editorial writer for the *International Herald Tribune*, who, invoking “humanitarian” reasons, has argued since 1975 for the reestablishment of empires. Pfaff calls on Europe to “go back into Africa” to exert a kind of “disinterested colonialism,” and declares himself in favor of putting them under temporary trusteeship, lasting 50 or 100 years, which would give these

countries time to give themselves a true civilian society and solid institutions.

Salamé also cites Richard K. Betts, who, in 1994, was saying that to end civil wars, we must break with “interventions limited by time and objective,” and rather engage in an “imperial impartiality”: a form of massive involvement in conflicts, with the objective of lending a hand to the victor and thereby abbreviating the agony of the weak!

And this evolution, Salamé accurately underscores, brought forth considerable protest. If the leaders in the South do not have the sense to call for help from the powers in the

Jacques Chirac in Africa

During an official visit to Gabon, on July 16-17, French President Jacques Chirac threw his support to his “friend” Omar Bongo, who has been in power there since 1967 and was preparing to face legislative and senatorial elections at the end of the year. For the occasion, Chirac decided to give a lesson on “Afro-optimism,” as he put it.

The French President declared that over the last two years, according to the International Monetary Fund, Africa has had growth of about 5%. Chirac saw this figure as proof of the “success of the structural adjustment plans.”

Growth of what? Ghana, the model of the “African miracle,” with an annual GDP heading for 4.8%? Between 1986 and 1991, it watched its employment drop by 13%. Today, one out of every three Africans lives on less than one franc per day (about 20¢). Even the UN, in its World Development Report for 1996, considered that what was being called “growth” in economists’ jargon, was not the same as creation of jobs and economic development, and remained a “failure” for one-third of the world’s population.

Yes, there is growth, especially in financial flows. The stock market in Zimbabwe grew 123%, and in Ghana 50%, in one year. But industry, agriculture, physical and social infrastructure—these have been destroyed by the logic of austerity, closing the budget deficit, and immediate profit, which characterizes the structural adjustments Chirac so praises.

It’s not a question of being an “Afro-pessimist” or an “Afro-optimist,” but of destroying the world financial dictatorship; Jacques Chirac has amply demonstrated that he is not prepared to do that.

—Frédérique Vereycken

North, any pretext will do, to preach a good and vigorous intervention: wiping out the "misfortune of others," neutral and apolitical humanitarian interventions, or even "straightening out a world" threatened by "shameful Munichs," bloody dictatorships, or tribal massacres.

All the while, the ideologues are looking for a theoretical fig leaf to cover their machinations. Salamé cites Jean Marie Guehenno (*The End of Democracy*), who says that, if the age to come is "imperial," it is above all "because it succeeds the nation-state, as the Roman Empire succeeded the Roman Republic: human society has become too vast to form a body politic"; according to him, the idea of empire describes "a world both unified and deprived of a center."

Bertrand Badie, another one of these theoreticians, believes that "the empire unfurls like an original political construction, provided with territory for its own usage, which distinguishes it from the nation-state by opposing to the virtues of unity, fixity, and borders, those of multiplicity, flexibility, and *limes*."

While no particular imperial configuration has made its appearance, and many people are still questioning what form this new empire should take, throughout the countries of the North, armies are being prepared for their new missions. The reorganization of the French Army into a professional rapid deployment force, capable of projecting 50,000 men into distant theaters, a development that President Jacques Chirac fully confirmed, but whose general tendency was already apparent in the 1994 Defense White Paper, is not an isolated case. In London, Rome, Brussels, or the United States, the most recent "defense white papers" all insist on the necessity of developing armies for projection.

Finally, Salamé notes the hypocrisy with which today's imperial verbiage decks itself. No longer a question of overtly invoking economic advantages accrued from conquest, "the new empires" have different suits, masks, and objectives than those of yesteryear. While protection of one's nationals overseas is again on the agenda, defense of human rights replaces the "mission to bring civilization," stopping civil wars has substituted "protection of international trade routes," and the protection of the non-governmental organizations is a continuation of that "formerly offered to missionary orders."

Although he gives a good description of the strategic evolution of the world in the recent years, Salamé still does not come close to what makes up the motor force of this evolution: the rising power, since the 1970s, of a strong financier oligarchy in the industrialized countries. If the United Nations is becoming weak, if entire countries are either disappearing or are threatened with disappearing, if there is no longer anyone in the Third World willing to establish sovereign, modern industrial nations, it is certainly because a virtual war of attrition has been carried out by the circles who stand against the nation-state, in order to give free rein to finance. The reduction of states by successive deregulations has globalized a financial system seeking to maximize short-term profits. The loot-

ing of industrial capacities and populations by the cancerous growth of a financial system which sucks up all capital for speculation, has engendered a profound economic crisis which weakens states and lays the groundwork for ethnic, tribal, or other sorts of conflicts.

Africa put under trusteeship

As Hurd and others publicly hope, Africa is, once again, overripe to fall into their imperialist hands. The conditions were first created by the structural adjustment policy of the International Monetary Fund during the 1980s, which brutally brought to an end any tentative efforts for industrial progress in Africa. The end of the Cold War in the 1990s, in turn, was the *coup de grâce* for many of these countries, whose sole reason for being lay in their geostrategic value to the blocs, and which have since witnessed the progressive disengagement of their former protecting powers. This is why there is an economic collapse of the black continent, the return of putschism, the appearance of tribal wars and drug mafias.

Hence, the rule of the game defined by the former colonial powers is called military economic triage: There are the viable countries, especially South Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, with respect to which South Africa will play a pivotal role, the most developed countries of the French preserve and English-speaking Africa: Uganda, Sudan, and Nigeria. Then, there are the others. The former still represent some potential for the countries of the North: Aside from the overseas residents who still live there, to whom one must ensure a minimum of security and protection, there are also commercial interests. Sub-Saharan Africa represents, for example, one-third of Europe's diamond imports, and 4-5% of Europe's foreign trade in oil.

The economic triage which already translates into a constant reduction in foreign aid and outside investment (5% of foreign investments in the South between 1990 and 1995), will be accompanied by military triage. "France no longer has the means to intervene everywhere," is the refrain on everyone's lips. That is the context in which to see a certain tendency begun by France toward "Europeanizing" the preserve, a development which becomes apparent in France's call for aid from the Western European Union and the United Nations during the Rwanda massacres.

Since then, as shown by the recent Chaillot Notebook #22, put out by the Western European Union (WEU), the role of the Union in Africa is the subject of studies not only by the WEU, but also by NATO and the UN. Since the Western European Union has recently become the armed branch for European defense within NATO, it is clear that from now on, Africa is an open field for interventions by the Atlantic organization. Some of these interventions, however, will be undertaken by the Organization of African Unity, acting as intermediary. As the Chaillot Notebook #22 confirms, the Franco-British proposal to the Chartres Summit in 1994 to

Colonialism—‘the best thing since the Flood’

Lord Lugard, first British governor-general of Nigeria:

“Pax Britannica, which shall stop this lawless raiding and this constant inter-tribal war, will be the greatest blessing that Africa has known since the Flood.”

Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India:

“We are here in obedience to what I call a decree of Providence for the lasting benefit of millions of the human race.”

William Pfaff, *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 10, 1990:

“If Africans themselves cannot maintain a civil order on the continent with a minimal assurance of human dignity, as the multinational force is attempting to establish in Liberia, then some kind of international custodianship—a neo-colonialism of some kind—is likely to be seen as the alternative to mounting anarchy and a contagious violence.”

John Keegan, “The Case for a New Colonialism,” *Daily Telegraph*, July 25, 1994:

“While airlifts and small-scale military intervention may alleviate a little of the harm done, it cannot bring the old Rwanda back. Empire was better for the Rwandans than independence. Should we be looking towards some reversal of decolonization?”

“In Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and parts of Latin America, the philosophies of the American and French revolutions—*independence, liberty, equality, even fraternity*—ran riot. The United States had a great deal to do with that. American presidents and electorates alike disapproved of empire. Their national beliefs derived from the events of 1776—what had been good for them must be good for other peoples as well.”

The United States “actively opposed British and French efforts to sustain their indirect empire in Egypt in 1956, making common cause with the Soviet Union to end the Suez operation. It generally took the side of black against white in British, French, Belgian, Spanish and Portuguese Africa. . . .

“If the peace-making agencies of the civilized world—and that includes the United States—wish to make their sense of outrage at disorder in the old empires effective, they must overcome their distaste for imperial forms and set about re-creating equivalent services. Civilization is not about literature and the plastic arts. It is about duty, courage and respect for the eternal verities. The pursuit of happiness is all very well. The rule of law is what makes it possible. . . .

“India is now riven by worse communal disorder than it was under the Raj, and caste is more, not less, dominant. . . . Peace-making requires ruthlessness. It requires peace-makers to exert superior force over peace-breakers. Sleeman, the British officer who broke the cult of ritual murder practiced by the Thug cult of India, simply killed its devotees out of hand wherever he found them. What would CNN have made of that?”

On Somalia: “The former Italian rulers showed less enthusiasm for separating the endemically contentious factions than the idealistic Americans.”

On Rwanda: “Decolonization subjected the aristocratic Tutsis to the rule of the majority Hutus. What is going on now is a settlement of old scores, but with a ruthlessness never before imagined or indeed possible. . . .

“Peace-making requires the enlistment of the traditional warrior peoples to police the rest. Since they regard themselves as aristocrats—as the Tutsis do, and the high-caste Sikhs of the Punjab—they do not recommend themselves to the egalitarians of the television world. Much current disorder has to do with the local underdogs taking their revenge on the uppercrust whom the imperialists favored.”

provide the OAU with a mediating force capable of intervening in support operations and “reestablishing” peace, was communicated to the WEU, which has worked for that ever since. The Council of Europe examined this question several times since the Rwanda events, and the consensus was well under way to downplay the need to “Europeanize” crisis management operations in Africa, so as to avoid fears about the “secret operations” by the former colonial powers.

This “Europeanization” of military intervention in Africa constitutes virtually laying French national policy on that continent to rest. By opening the doors of French-speaking Africa

to the supranational institutions that Gen. Charles de Gaulle so vigorously fought—the IMF, WEU, NATO—France puts an end to any hope that these countries might have, to see France engaged on their side, with a politics of progress. To be sure, a French politics of progress toward Africa was usually not more than a hope, even in de Gaulle’s time—a hope which has fast given way to frenetic clientelism. Still, under the worst of conditions, France had a history of friendship with Africa. Today, France is preparing to give way to an imperial supranational bureaucracy, without heart or soul, with nothing to tie it to the history of Africa.