



## Some Racist

By Andrew Roberts

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**As the President of South Africa accuses Winston Churchill of racism, a leading historian argues that much of Africa has gone backwards since the end of British colonial rule.**

PRESIDENT Thabo Mbeki of South Africa has launched an aggressive attack on the British Empire's record in Africa in general, and Sir Winston Churchill's part in it in particular.

Speaking to the Sudanese assembly in Khartoum, he said that British imperialists such as Churchill travelled to South Africa and the Sudan 'doing terrible things wherever they went. justifying what they did by defining the native peoples of Africa as savages that had to be civilised even against their will'.

Mr Mbeki went on to say that the Empire's 'terrible legacy' was a continent divided by race, colour, religion and culture.

In fact, there was never a period in history when the continent of Africa was not divided by race, colour and so on.

But in the short time that Britain ran large parts of it, a system of laws and good government was imposed that meant that endemic inter-tribal massacres were banished - only to reappear in the military coups and one party dictatorships that followed independence.

Africa has never known better times than during British rule where beforehand there was anarchy and all too often afterwards tyranny.

It is, of course, true that Churchill was what we would in modern terms describe as a racist. In common with almost everyone of his age, class and background, he saw mankind in terms of a hierarchy in which Europeans were self-evidently in a higher state of national and historical development than Africans and Asians.

But utterly contrary to what President Mbeki assumes, this meant that Churchill and his contemporaries believed that the most developed countries, such as Britain, had an absolute moral duty to bring civilisation to those that were less developed.

It might seem absurdly outdated today, but it was a powerfully positive force for good at the time.

CONSIDER the words of Sir Alan Burns, governor of the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) in 1941. He was the son and grandson of colonial administrators, the third of a family that devoted lifelong careers for a civilising cause they knew to be just.

As he recalled: 'When one considers colonial rule, one's got remember what was there before it started in West Africa. Cannibalism, slavery and various other abominations all existed in Nigeria and the Gold Coast.

When we went out there, we abolished slavery as far as we could, we abolished human sacrifices as far as we could and we abolished various other enormities.'

If that constitutes 'civilising savages against their will', so be it. but is it really such a 'terrible legacy'?

Other elements of the British Empire's 'terrible legacy' to Africa might include the introduction of crop rotation to Kenya, the discovery and extraction of copper and diamonds in Zambia, the mass inoculation campaigns against yellow fever, typhus and malaria in Nigeria, and the vast education programmes run in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

Not forgetting the irrigation projects along the Nile. the huge government (i.e. British taxpayer-funded) investment in East Africa to combat African unemployment in the 1940s, the propeasantry Egyptian tax reforms: under Lord Cromer and the protection of the Suez Canal.

Plus the introduction of the English language (the world's first tongue in terms of international business), railways, dams, and legal systems that guaranteed the rights of property.

Had it not been for the British Empire in Africa, Mr Mbeki would not be president of a liberal, parliamentary, constitutional South Africa. He would have had to address the Sudanese assembly in a language they did not understand rather than English, and there would probably not even have been such a body in the first place, since it was set up by the departing British on independence in 1956.

Equally, all he needs to do is look north from South Africa to Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe to see how a once flourishing agrarian economy can be destroyed by ideological dogma.

Mbeki's predecessor, Nelson Mandela, has been generous in acknowledging, not least in his autobiography *The Long Walk To Freedom*, that his education in a British-run school and his sympathy for the British cause during World War II meant that he had 'not discarded the influence Britain and British history and culture exercised on us'.

What a shame therefore, that his successor should make this historically ignorant outburst. (Mr Mbeki attended Sussex University in the Sixties, which in those days was rancid with Leftwing post-imperial guilt.)

The idea that the British ran some kind of tyranny in Africa is simply laughable. Consider the extraordinary statistics in Trevor Royle's book about the end of the empire there, *Winds Of Change*.

'When Britain went to war with Germany in 1939, her African empire consisted of 1.3 million square miles made up of 13 different territories, yet the colonial service in Africa consisted only of several hundred officials [administrators]. 'In Nigeria, there were only 4,000 European soldiers and policemen in a country of 20 million inhabitants; in the Sudan, throughout the 57 years of the condominium, only 393 officers served in the Sudan Political Service.'

Sudan was twice the size of Texas, yet such was the relative peace that reigned there between 1899 and independence in 1956 that fewer than 400 Britons were needed to administer it. It also had among the lowest crime – let alone murder – rates in Africa.

Compare that to the bloody history of independent Sudan, and especially the past two years, in which more than 70,000 innocent people have been massacred.

Ask yourself the salient question: when has Sudan been most peaceful, most justly administered and happiest?

The blacks of South Africa had to wait until 1994 before they got the right to vote, unlike those parts of Africa that Britain gave independence to in the Fifties and Sixties.

This was because South Africa was ruled over by Afrikaaners, who treated the native population with a wholly different and far harsher severity than the British ever had theirs.

Yet, far from thanking Churchill for going out to fight against the Afrikaaners, as he did in the Boer War that raged between 1899 and 1902, Mr Mbeki castigates him.

The true reputation of the British Empire in Africa - as opposed to Mr Mbeki's travesty of it - is such that Mozambique has applied to become a member of the Commonwealth, even though the British never even ruled over that country.

It was colonised by the Portuguese, who only left in 1975, yet it is to our Commonwealth that Mozambique has turned for admission. Would this have been the case if we had really left a 'terrible legacy' in Africa?

No. As so often, it is to internal politics that one must look for an explanation for Mr Mbeki's unhistorical remarks. As so often with black nationalist leaders in Africa, the evil white imperialists are blamed for crimes that must in fact be traced back to the black politicians themselves.

'Mbeki's South Africa has done nothing to rein in the genocidal Khartoum regime that has committed such horrific crimes of ethnic cleansing in Darfur, so he has attacked Churchill and the British Empire in order to deflect criticism from himself.

Sudan will have been independent from Britain for half a century next January, and South Africa won independence from Britain far earlier than that. When will African leaders finally be willing to admit their own errors rather than blame their continent's ills on colonialism?

For the fact remains that in the long history of the Dark Continent, the brief period when ordinary Africans were most content, most secure, most justly governed and least likely to be oppressed by their tribal enemies was when they were administered by the British Empire.