

# Failure At Geneva

By Tom Wicker

The British ambassador has returned to Geneva to try to breathe some life into the conference on the future of Rhodesia. But for all practical purposes the conference is dead; and in fact, it may never have been alive at all.

The black nationalists didn't want the conference to begin with, because they didn't believe they should have to negotiate for their own country with Ian Smith, Prime Minister of the white minority regime in Rhodesia. The presidents of the black African nations most concerned didn't want the conference either, and for much the same reason.

Mr. Smith may have wanted the conference to happen, but he surely wants it to fail. In that event, not only will he have had at least the fleeting legitimacy of participating in an international conference but anything he does next he will be able to explain as a result of failure at Geneva.

Even Britain, ostensibly the Western power most involved, has not as yet shown much willingness to take a supervisory part in an actual transition from a white minority to a black majority government. Without such a willingness, probably no negotiation on the subject could have succeeded, because Mr. Smith is so little trusted by the blacks.

Since Secretary of State Kissinger's intervention in southern African politics, which produced the Geneva conference, the American elections have been concluded. Now there is to be a new Administration in Washington and to the black nationalist leaders and the black presidents of Africa, it probably appears sensible to wait and see what attitude Jimmy Carter will take. His views on southern Africa, as on many other subjects, are a question mark.

At the very least, however, the black African leaders may hope that Mr. Carter's Administration will draw

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back from the aggressive management of the southern African crisis that Mr. Kissinger has lately undertaken. In cooperation with Prime Minister Vorster of South Africa, the Secretary clearly has been forcing events in the region; Mr. Carter might conceivably be more willing to let events take their course.

That is probably the one thing Mr. Vorster wants least; and in the opinion of a number of American students of Africa, the Kissinger-Vorster policy—in which the Geneva conference and a staged transition to a black government in Rhodesia were to have been early rounds—was designed to preserve essentially intact the white regime in South Africa. In effect, majority rule in Rhodesia and semi-independence from South Africa for the Transkei and Namibia were to have been traded for a South Africa in which the 20 percent of the population that is white would continue to control 80 percent of the land, including most of the country's resources.

Why should Henry Kissinger or any American Government want to preserve a white regime in South Africa? There are at least three good reasons, of which the most obvious is that South African gold, uranium and other resources are of immense value, and trade relations between the two countries are of great importance. A black regime, particularly if it were radical or Marxist, in Washington's view, might well upset those relations and shut off the resources.

Mr. Kissinger, moreover, like most postwar Secretaries of State has shown extraordinary sensitivity to the supposed dangers of "instability" anywhere in the world. Since his setback in Angola, Mr. Kissinger has focused his fear of instability on southern Africa. And instability, perhaps even spreading instability, would result from black-white warfare in Rhodesia and from more of the black resistance seen in South Africa last summer.

Mr. Kissinger also tends to see events anywhere in the context of Soviet-American rivalry. No doubt he believes that the instability he fears in southern Africa could lead to enhanced Soviet influence—perhaps even Soviet bases on the Atlantic and Indian Oceans—in an area Washington considers of high strategic importance.

But these considerations leave out of account the legitimate aspirations of the black people involved; the bad name to be earned everywhere, particularly in the third world, by too close association with a racist regime; and the possibility that such an association will influence black African leaders to turn to the Soviets for help.

When he takes over, Mr. Carter might at least put these factors into the equation; if he did, he might find that American interests would be better served by helping emerging nations than by propping up repressive regimes.