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Frontline's reputation, while not a major household talking-point, has certain fixed features. One of these is: "Ah, yes, you were the guys who published **Rian Malan** before anybody heard of him". Well, yes, thank you. Sort of. We did publish Rian somewhat, and intersected on other fronts too. For instance Nomavenda Mathiane, *Frontline's* star columnist/deputy-editor/front-office-person and so forth, brought quite a bearing to the thinking that Rian articulated in his blockbuster *My Traitor's Heart*. But the sad truth, which we're not breathing to anyone, is that most of the *Frontline*/Malan connection came after *Frontline's* death-by-starvation. Rian was a relative regular in *Frontline's* ghost, a couple of pages called *From the Frontline* that ran for a while in Joburg's *Sunday Star* (now also long deceased).

Not all the news is fit to print

*Twenty years later, what has changed? Oprah needs no introduction and South Africa is not at war. As to the essential elements – do we look straight at right and wrong or do we let wrong be less wrong when the right side does it – well, let's put it this way, **Rian Malan** was uncannily prescient.*

Oprah Winfrey is big and black and blunt and America's newest TV talk-show superstar. Towards the end of August, she did a show on apartheid, and when I tuned in her guests were telling atrocity tales. The South African police were mowing down civil-rights activists in the streets. They were assassinating black radicals. They were shooting the shoulder blades off innocent African children "clipping their wings," it's called – more or less for fun.

In the closing moments of the show, Winfrey turned to the camera and declared, "We said we'd never let it happen again, but it is happening. It's happening in South Africa today. Another holocaust is under way." Photographs of bloodied black protesters and broken black bodies flashed across the screen, African music swelled in the background, and then the commercials rolled.

NOT ALL THE NEWS IS FIT TO PRINT

It was perfect television but not so perfect journalism. For a start, Winfrey's mathematics was poor, as was her ability to distinguish between degrees of evil. But what really irked me was the assumption that the South African story never changes. No need to update the news. No need for new insights. The country remains as it was three or five years ago, when images of South African bloodshed were a nightly staple on network news.

After the Botha government kicked cameramen out of the townships on 12 June 1986, South Africa vanished from the world's television sets. Since nobody has informed them otherwise, Americans assume the carnage carries on unseen. This is not the case. The massive detentions of 1986 broke the back of the rebellion, and subsequent restrictions smothered it. By Christmas 1986, the uprising was petering out. Many black children returned to school. It became possible for whites to go into townships again without running a gauntlet of stones. By 1988, you could drive through Soweto and see scarcely any police. And no white soldiers or armoured vehicles at all.

Of course, some police abuse occurs or there would be no reason to retain the ban on filming police action; still, the government declared that the situation was returning to normal, and the government was more or less right. In South Africa, normal is intensely uneasy and strained. The white underground blows up church and trade-union buildings. Black teenagers emerge from spells in detention telling ugly tales of torture. Radicals are murdered by mysterious hands. Newspapers are suspended, editors intimidated, foreign correspondents expelled. These were the major human-rights scandals in South Africa in the past three years, and they were all reported by the local and foreign press. As for Winfrey's invisible holocaust, it simply did not take place.

"This is not a society where it is possible to cover up major events, major atrocities, for any length of time," says John Battersby, who has covered the country for *The New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor*. "If one takes the time, one can find out what is going on. Very little escapes *The Weekly Mail* or *Vrye Weekblad* these days."

Those newspapers are part of South Africa's alternative press, as distinct from its opposition press. The opposition press (12 dailies, three Sundays, and an independent monthly) is liberal in the white western tradition, standing for free elections, free markets, and gradual, negotiated solutions. The alternative press (eight weeklies or biweeklies, 10 news agencies, and two monthlies) has little time for such niceties; it exists primarily to advance the liberal struggle and expose the wrongs of apartheid. The alternative press is not free, but its

very existence is anomalous in a country cursed with what *The Washington Post* calls “one of the harshest systems of press censorship in the world.”

The alternative papers don't exactly exhort the masses to rise, but they do paraphrase the forbidden words of listed or banned activists, convey some sense of the underground's line, and pursue such sensitive stories as alleged police involvement in political assassinations. Most break the law several times in any given issue, and yet, brief suspensions aside, they appear on the streets like clockwork.

Why? It's hard to say. The relationship between Pretoria and the press is subtle, a cat-and-mouse game rather than outright war. The press restrictions look totalitarian on paper, but save for the ban on cameras, they have been enforced selectively and sometimes not at all.

If Pretoria wants to show the white right that it retains virility, it'll charge a newspaper for publishing a photograph of “security force action” or kick a correspondent out of the country. If it's trying to win friends abroad or mollify the white centre, it'll be sweetly reasonable. Things go up, things go down, but some variant of truth comes out in the end.

“Basically,” says William Claiborne, *The Washington Post* correspondent in Johannesburg, “I haven't been inhibited from writing any stories that I really wanted to write.”

John Battersby concurs. “The emergency regulations have sort of lapsed into obscurity,” he says. “Nobody takes them very seriously at all.”

No one who watched American TV coverage of South Africa's September parliamentary election would find grounds to doubt that statement. The entire pre-election defiance campaign was thoroughly documented by the American press, and when police forcibly suppressed protests in Cape Town and surrounding townships it was transmitted to American living rooms in living colour, censorship notwithstanding. Every clip shown on American television theoretically entitled the person who shot it to 10 years in a South African jail, with the option of a \$9 000 fine.

So how come America saw this, when for years it saw no police violence at all?

For a couple of reasons. For one, it was the first time in a while that the police actually provided scenes of widespread public brutality for the press to cover. Secondly, it was the perfect South African story: an apartheid morality play in which white villains suppress black victims and innocent people suffer injury

and death. Give the networks a story like that, and they'll go into the townships, shoot "illegal" footage of police dispersing crowds with birdshot, and show it on the evening news.

All that's left is to trot out Archbishop Desmond Tutu on *Nightline* – Ted Koppel's late-night TV news show – to explain it all. And that's what happened, on the night after the bloody election. Twelve protesters had been killed, or 25, or 29, depending on who was counting, and Koppel was appalled. "We've seen more violence today than we've seen in several years," he said.

I heard several similar statements from other TV newscasters that week and read one in the *Los Angeles Times*: "Tuesday saw the worst violence in three years."

Hmmm. The worst violence in three years. The sad fact is that at least 2 000 people have died in political violence in South Africa in the past three years – five times more people than killed by apartheid's riot police in 1986. That's a pretty substantial pile of corpses to have escaped Ted Koppel's attention, but perhaps he is not to blame. The victims were mostly Zulus, killed by Zulus, so their deaths were not accorded much significance by his colleagues in the American press.

Which brings me, finally, to the Boer broadside I wish to fire. The flow of news from South Africa is governed by two forms of censorship. One is imposed by Pretoria to shield its banana-republic goonsquadism from public view. The other is an invisible force that acts on the hearts and minds of well-intentioned Just White Men. On the basis of the record, it's sometimes hard to tell which is the more powerful of the two.

Consider the American media's love affair with the immensely telegenic and bitingly articulate Winnie Mandela. It began towards the end of 1985, when Mandela, in defiance of the apartheid state, unbanned herself and moved back to Soweto from the Orange Free State town of Brandfort. In the ensuing year, she made 70 appearances on network television and merited 22 stories in *The New York Times*, America's hugely influential paper of record. Scores of flattering magazine profiles were written, plus at least three books. Cable television made a movie. Harry Belafonte announced plans for a mini-series. Mandela was awarded honorary degrees by European and American universities and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. By 1988, she had become one of the most famous women in the world. When one of Bill Cosby's TV daughters gave birth to twins and decided to christen them "Nelson and Winnie," the tribute didn't have to be explained. Nelson was apartheid's living martyr, and Winnie

was his consort, the brave and selfless Mother of the Nation.

This, at any rate, was the Winnie of American headlines and TV screens. The real Winnie Mandela was in deep trouble, thanks to the actions of the “Mandela United Football Club,” the group of radical youths who lived in her backyard and functioned as her bodyguard. It was a great honour to be chosen a member of the team. The Mandela footballers strutted around Orlando West as if they owned the place, enforcing boycotts, harassing suspected collaborators, and demanding free drinks in shebeens. They commandeered the football pitch at the local high school in the name of the freedom struggle, and some locals claim they did the same with young girls.

On July 28, 1988, they allegedly dragged a schoolgirl off the street and raped her in Mandela’s home. This was the last straw for pupils at nearby Daliwonga High. They downed their pens and pencils and marched menacingly on the Mandela home, providing American journalists with a story that threatened to devastate a myth they helped create.

Most reports of the arson attack were consequently vague and elliptical, so devoid of detail as to be virtually meaningless. *The Washington Post* spoke of “vandalism,” while CBS attributed the attack to members of some amorphous “black gang.” Nobody said anything about rape. As for NBC, it sidestepped the facts entirely and presented the incident as yet another apartheid atrocity, perpetrated by the Boers. Trevor Tutu, the archbishop’s son, merely insinuated that “the system” had done it, but the Rev Allan Boesak said it outright: the racist regime is to blame. The story occupied a third of NBC’s prime-time newscast, ending with a segment in which Mandela spoke movingly of her lifelong “struggle for justice.”

Ask foreign correspondents about such gulfs between the real and the apparent and they tend to mumble about “murky circumstances” and “confusion,” a condition endemic in Soweto at the time. They have a point, I suppose. Most of them are whites who speak only English, and nailing down facts in the townships is difficult for them at the best of times.

Covering trials in the secure heart of white Johannesburg, on the other hand is a piece of cake. A month or so after the arson incident, people surrounding Winnie Mandela – her chauffeur, some of her bodyguards, her daughter’s live-in boyfriend – began appearing in Johannesburg courts on charges ranging from assault to murder with an AK-47. Mandela was not a defendant in any of these trials, but she featured in the testimony, allegedly playing roles at harrowing odds with her image in the outside world.

“Winnie ‘Served Tea’ to Youths Tortured in Her Backyard,” read one headline in *The Weekly Mail*. “Winnie Off The Hook as Murder Trial Witness,” said another. Such stories raised eyebrows in South Africa and prepared the populace for the shock of the Stompie scandal which came five months later. Americans, on the other hand, heard nothing. Not a word was said in any major newspaper, and there was nothing on TV.

Certain men in Pretoria would no doubt take this as proof of an “anti-South African” conspiracy, but the reality is more subtle. It’s not easy to be a foreign correspondent in South Africa.

Reporters spend their days talking to black people who often live in indescribably difficult circumstances. It’s impossible not to empathise and share their dislike for “the system.” Their cause is so palpably right that it seems distasteful to criticise them for doing wrong, and, besides, you’re not sure the outside world really wants to hear.

South Africa is the only place where good and evil are supposed to be clearly demarcated, the one hard rock in a global swamp of relativistic equivocation. The entire human race is chorusing in unison on apartheid, and it’s so much easier just to hum the standard themes. Even that offers no safety; people like Oprah Winfrey are still likely to slam you for not singing loudly enough. The guests on her most recent apartheid special complained that American reports failed to investigate the links between the white state and black vigilantes, underreported South Africa’s military bullying of its neighbours, underestimated the enormous extent of black suffering under apartheid, and so on.

The fact is, these stories were covered – even if not to the extent that would make the left happy. But I know of one story that was not covered at all: the bloody 1986 power struggle between Charterists and supporters of the Black Consciousness, or BC, movement.

In 1986, many of South Africa’s black townships were divided into rival BC and Charterist strongholds, and by October the rival movements were at war. Most of the fighting involved undisciplined youth-movement zealots who burned one another’s homes, hacked enemies to death on the streets, and kidnapped and murdered each other’s next of kin. Around 70 people died, among them several authentic heroes of the anti-apartheid struggle.

Masabata Loate was a leader of the 1976 Soweto student rebellion and a former political prisoner. She was stabbed to death by a mob. Martin Mohau had done a stretch on Robben Island for crimes against the state. He was doused

with petrol, put inside a car tyre, and burned alive.

All this struck me as a pretty compelling story, but the American press didn't cover the BC-Charterist feud at all.

Why? One Johannesburg-based correspondent said internal divisions in the black resistance were "too complicated" to make much sense to an American audience, another that the story was "relatively unimportant." William Claiborne of The Washington Post added that the BC movement was "a Laurel and Hardy act, feckless and ineffectual" compared to the UDF and its mighty parent, the exiled ANC.

There is some truth in this. The ANC is more popular and potent, and yet the BC movement remains a contender. It seems astonishing that the American press should disregard its fate entirely, but then its very existence has never been acknowledged in the United States – not on television, anyway.

In the 1980s, representatives of the ANC and its allied organisations made thousands of appearances on network news. According to Tim Ngobene, a black South African exile who runs a BC support group in California, spokesmen for his side made only two. "We have been systematically excluded," says Ngobene, who theorises that the BC movement's radical "black power" line offends the white humanists who control the news. "The American media's stake is that South Africa is supposed to a civil-rights struggle," he says. "Anything else is threatening."

That about sums it up. There are indeed similarities between South Africa and the American South of the 1950s and early 1960s, but they only go so far. Viewed from a simple civil-rights perspective, South Africa becomes a country where stark white vice comes up against stark black virtue. This leaves no room for a second black liberation movement, such as the Black Consciousness camp; no role for Winnie Mandela other than as Mother of the Nation; and no room for much else besides.

If you study American coverage of South Africa, you see that it falters in three broad areas:

1. The nature of political violence. Accurate figures are hard to come by, but some 5 000 people are said to have died in political violence in South Africa in the past five years. Of these, around 1 200 were black protesters or rioters killed by apartheid police. The remainder – a significant majority – perished in internecine violence within black communities. Such bloodshed receives a mere fraction of the play accorded to white police brutality, and it leaves most Amer-

icans with a somewhat skewed impression of the forces at work in the country.

When police shot and killed 23 unarmed black protesters in Uitenhage's Langa township, for instance, the story made the front page of *The New York Times* twice in a single week, with several follow-up stories later. Contrast this with coverage of the bloody Zulu civil war, which pits urbanised, left-leaning members of the United Democratic Front against supporters of Inkatha, the more conservative "cultural movement" led by Chief Gatsha Buthelezi. The conflict began in earnest towards the end of 1986, and the death toll has since climbed to about 2 500, according to the South African press; 4 000, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. The true tally remains unknown. Scores of thousands are homeless and the sheer scale of suffering is mind-numbing. CBS ran an item about one of the first skirmishes in this war, back in January 1987, but I haven't seen it on TV since. The *Los Angeles Times* index reveals a single feature on the subject in 1987 and 1988, along with a filler or two. *The New York Times'* record is similar – one piece in 1987, a longer one in 1988, a wire-service story about a short-lived truce, and a few fillers here and there.

Such sporadic, half-hearted coverage dishonours the Zulu dead and denies Americans an important insight into the peculiar psychopathy of white South Africa, a community held together at least partially by fear. A vast majority of whites believe that free elections and majority rule might herald the onset of anarchy, and internecine township violence intensifies their apprehension. There are the ingredients of an important story here.

2. The cultural landscape. In the American media, South Africa is somehow divorced from its continent. Everyone appears to speak fluent English, subscribe to generic western values, and exist in a philosophical framework similar to white America's – a perfect setting for a simple human-rights struggle.

If South Africa were really like that, it might not be a cauldron of racial violence at all. In truth, South Africa is made up of many kingdoms of culture, language, and consciousness, all overlapping and interlocking in strange and complex ways. A majority of South Africans say they are Christians, for instance, but the faith means different things to different people. For whites and westernised blacks, it means traditional western theology. For almost 10 million blacks, it means membership in an "independent" or "free" African church – free of European religious imperialism. Members of the free churches worship the holy trinity, but they also honour their African ancestors and believe in dreams as communications from the realm of spirits.

Beyond that, untold millions of Africans are simply and proudly pagan, for lack of a less judgmental word. They worship their ancestors, perform rites that have been illegal under white law for at least a century, and often ascribe illness and misfortune to the supernatural.

These are South Africa's invisible people, poor and ill-educated for the most part. Nobody pays much attention to them, least of all the press. From time to time, however, they assert their Africanness in ways that American liberals find hard to face. Consider a clipping from *The New York Times* of 15 April 1986. At the top of the page is a 14-inch story about Desmond Tutu's election as archbishop of Cape Town. It is an elegant piece of writing, intended to evoke the mood of a cathedral in which one might hear stirring the most noble aspects of the human spirit.

"The doors suddenly opened. light poured from the chapel into the darkness ... and Bishop Tutu stepped into the cool air" to deliver a moving civil-rights speech. He called upon South African churches to transform "religious belief into political code," and rededicated himself to the pursuit of "fundamental change."

Beneath the Tutu story is a minute headline reading, "Eleven die in night of violence." The police shot and killed five black people, and six anonymous burnt bodies were found. And beneath that, unheralded by any headline, are four cryptic little sentences about the discovery of the remains of 32 African women in Sekhukuniland, hurled alive into pits of flame.

This was all the news that was fit to print; the rest was clearly too much for *The New York Times* to cope with. Indeed, the only major newspaper in America brave enough to cover this story fully was the Los Angeles Times. The Sekhukuniland incident was the worst mass murder in South African history, and it was in a sense a political event. The 67 youths arrested in connection with the killings were supporters of the UDF, the supposedly nonviolent movement championed by the Nobel Peace laureate whose election to archbishop topped the news from South Africa that day. The 32 victims were suspected of using witchcraft to retard the anti-apartheid struggle and were killed in the name of fundamental change.

3. The ideological landscape. Several years ago, writer Nadine Gordimer visited the United States to promote *Burger's Daughter*, a novel about an Afrikaner who dedicates his life to black liberation. American reviewers, interviewers, and talk-show hosts unfailingly described this man as a "noble white liberal," which Gordimer found a little irksome, since her character wasn't a liberal at

all. He was a committed communist.

She repeatedly corrected Americans on this point, but they didn't seem to hear. The good guys in the civil-rights struggle were liberals, so Lionel Burger had to be a liberal, too, no matter what his creator said. "This is not a matter of misreading or misunderstanding," Gordimer said. "It is the substitution of one set of values for another."

This substitution is critical because it allows Americans to insert themselves imaginatively into the South African drama. Apartheid offends their liberal values, so they assume those fighting it in real life are liberals, too – a delusion actively encouraged by the American press. Some of Pretoria's visible opponents are indeed liberal in the western sense – people like Alan Paton and Helen Suzman – but their position in South African society, as liberal rather than left, is never accurately portrayed.

Paton committed the unforgivable sin of taking PW Botha's reforms seriously and died a quisling in the ANC's eyes. Suzman took an uncompromising stand against violent revolution and was thus dismissed by ANC president Oliver Tambo as "one of the indigenous agents of racism."

ANC supporters bombed the offices of the Progressive Federal Party for participating in parliamentary politics and have disrupted speeches by members of the PFP's successor, the Democratic Party.

Why? Because much of the anti-apartheid opposition is not liberal at all. The American media is incapable of reflecting this because it is afraid to use the words socialist or revolutionary, afraid to be accused of red-baiting a just cause.

In truth, high-profile sectors of the South African liberation movement are avowedly, openly socialist. They say that a huge percent of the black South Africans are unemployed, that some 16 people live in a typical township house, and that upwards of 40% of black children are malnourished.

In such a place, socialism has its apparent logic, and the ANC long ago fell under its sway.

It's hard to identify an ANC leader who has not spoken of the Soviet socialist revolution as the most hopeful event of this century. Oliver Tambo has repeatedly endorsed the "correctness" of the line pursued by the socialist rulers of Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania. His second-in-command, Alfred Nzo, has pledged solidarity with the socialist forces in Kampuchea, Laos, and Afghanistan, adding that he and Vietnam's socialist masters have much in common: "Common aims, objectives and ... common enemies."

Those aims and objectives are, of course, revolutionary rather than liberal, but there is no room for revolutionaries within a civil-rights paradigm. In the American press, revolutionaries become bland “anti-apartheid activists,” so lacking in ideological muscle definition that the average reader is left believing they want only to move to the front of the bus.

Consider Alan Cowell’s feature on the rise of the trade unions, as published in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* around Easter 1986. The piece focussed on the birth of Cosatu, a glorious instrument of black power, openly dedicated to a fundamental socialist remodeling of the South African economy.

Cosatu’s founding resolutions assert the principle of working-class leadership. Its members sing songs about socialism and meet in halls festooned with giant banners reading “Socialism is Freedom.” Its leaders step up to the microphone and socialist rhetoric is heard – but not by Alan Cowell.

He portrays Cosatu as if it were a moderate plumbers’ local in some American suburb, interested only in improving wages and working conditions. He contrives to mention socialism just once in 4 000 words, and then only in passing, in a passage implying that Cosatu leaders are torn between reform within the capitalist system and “some form of socialism.”

This is patently absurd and an insult to Cosatu to boot. In South Africa, organising workers is not the most safe and secure of jobs, and many men who do it are willing to die for their cause. So why does Alan Cowell deny them a label they so proudly claim? It’s quite simple, really. Socialists remain suspect in American minds, and Cowell didn’t want his readers to confuse the good guys and the bad. Like too many of his colleagues in Johannesburg’s foreign-press corps, he was scared of spoiling a good plot.

This essay was adapted from the quarterly journal of the Gannet Center for Media Studies at Columbia University in New York.