An Open Letter to P. W. Botha

By André Brink

GRAHAMSTOWN, South Africa
Mr. State President,
You have now succeeded in establishing a deadly silence surrounding yourself and your Government. Now no one can report on what you are planning or doing, no one can expose your lies and evils, no one can speak up for those oppressed, hounded, turned out of their burning homes, tortured or killed by the latest incarnations of the Gestapo. Not even the number of those who are disappearing around us daily may be divulged.

Why did you do this? You were annoyed, no doubt, by the proddings of the courts and by interference from concerned individuals, parliamentary investigators, enterprising journalists and others who persisted to bring to light the truths about your embattled regime. But in fact, with your arrogance, intransigence and organized campaigns of terror against the oppressed, you created the circumstances you required for the declaration of a state of emergency.

You assure us that you have good reason. "I have the facts," you shout. But we have seen the quality of your "facts" exposed before. Your Minister of Police offered the world your facts when he told us in March 1985 that your courageous and beleaguered police had tamed a violent mob at Uitenhage, near Port Elizabeth. But then public pressure forced you to institute a judicial commission of inquiry to look into what had happened, and we learned that the police had fired into a peaceful procession of men, women, children and babies,
killing no less than 21 demonstrators. You try to convince gullible Western leaders like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher that you are in fact a Great Reformer. So you scrap the Mixed Marriages Act, but then refuse to allow married people from different races to live together where they choose. You end forced removals; then “coincidental” violence involving your security forces happens to encourage the homeless to move voluntarily. You abolish the pass laws, then set about arresting countless blacks for “trespassing.” You bring a handful of colored and Indian people into Parliament and offer them an illusion of power sharing, but the moment they hesitate to cooperate in passing some of the most Draconian legislation this country has ever seen, you treat them like schoolboys — and press ahead with the legislation regardless.

You announce that you will discuss constitutional reform with black leaders while insuring that the true leaders of the people are kept in jail or detention. You assure the world that this is a free country, yet since long before the state of emergency the meekest peaceful protests have been brutally broken up. You tell us you are a Christian, yet you send in your forces to fire tear gas at funeral processions, forcing the mourners to drop their coffins in the road. And when we profess we cannot believe you, you try to end all criticism by imposing the Big Silence.

Where do I stand as a writer in this state of emergency? I know very well where I stand: the very act of committing to paper this open letter to you is a crime. I can be arrested for this. And if that happens, you may do your best to insure that people in South Africa will not even know that I am among the innumerable nameless ones who are disappearing every day. But I also know that I cannot submit to being silenced forcibly — not as long as I have a conscience to live with and I have breath enough to say “J’accuse!”

I have no illusions about what a writer can do, physically. But neither should you have illusions about a writer’s impotence. You are confident that you have finally reduced us to silence. But you have not. There may be some temporary silence in the land: the silence of prison walls so thick that you cannot see the blood on the insides of them or hear the muffled screams. But that blood, those screams, have a way of filtering through into the pens of writers.

I appeal to the writers of my land to bear witness. We shall not be silent forever. We have history on our side. We have truth on our side. You have muscled journalists. The “facts” may not be reported, except in the bland or mutilated forms of your choice. But fiction has a way of recording a truth deeper than fact. What cannot be stated directly, we must record in other ways: that is what makes us writers. And if we are not allowed to publish, we must find other ways to disseminate what conscience impels us to write. If need be, we must now emulate our Russian colleagues and resort to samizdat.

You may well fly into another of your rages at the thought of our following Russian examples. But how many times has your own regime allowed itself to be inspired by the Kremlin — in your state control of the economy, your interference with production and marketing, your restrictions on free expression and your police-state methods?

A commission of inquiry in Argentina recently reported on the atrocities that the military Government of that country resorted to in the mid-1970’s in an effort to stay in power. The report makes chilling reading, especially in South Africa, where one recognizes so many signs of heading in the same direction.

The Argentinian report is titled “Nunca Mas”: “Never again.” What a sad and terrible plea, in this broken world. But there may be some small solace, too, in knowing that certain historical patterns do recur — not only the darknesses, but the light as well. Nuremberg may indeed come round again.

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