SOUTH AFRICA RALLYS AROUND A NEW FLAG

By Wilbur L. Norman

The scope of change in South Africa has brought a new look to the fundamental elements by which this nation defined itself, from its map, now without 'Homelands', to its multiracial government. It was appropriate, then, that the Republic's ensign, its symbol both to itself and the world, also should have changed. The new South African national flag was raised, officially, one minute after midnight on April 27, 1994. The lowering of the old flag, only minutes before, and the hoisting of the new, in the nine cities slated to become regional capitals, provided a strong visual metaphor for the arriving new social order.

While most individuals in official positions avow no *official* meaning behind the colors in the new flag, Wesley Johanneson, Press Officer for the South African Embassy to the United States, expressed the thought lying just beneath the observations of most commentators: "There is something for everybody in the flag. You might say it is a compromise, of sorts."

The fact that few verbalize the claim, made by the Associated Press on the day the flag was publicly unfurled, that "the green, yellow and black Y-shaped symbol of the African National Congress" is present in the flag, speaks to the deft and gingerly approach all parties, even former combatants, have taken. Indeed, Wantu Venzile, assistant to the ANC's chief representative in Washington, D.C., would only echo, "It is a representative symbol. One shouldn't try to attach any meaning to the form or the symbols or colors." As one South African political affairs officer said, "We're getting people together in national reconciliation, not trying to pull people apart."

Securing a new flag was a fairly painless, if time consuming, exercise considering the strength and power of the emotions on all fronts. This is especially true for a country whose old flag, first flown on Union Day, 1928, was brought into service amid rancor over the place of the Union Jack in the design.

The wavering course to select the new flag began on September 7, 1993 when the country's Negotiating Council appointed a commission to look critically at various national symbols. This National Symbols Commission invited the public to submit designs for a new flag which resulted in an incredible 7000 entries.

Where the public had been given about four weeks to come up with proposals, the Commission itself had only a day to evaluate the designs and sort out the best ones. According to a member of the Negotiating Council, they had "literally from 11:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. with a lunch break in between." Only six designs of the thousands submitted passed muster and were forwarded to the Council. Its members, along with the public, proved unenthusiastic about any of the six designs.

The Negotiating Council, in a fall-back plan, then asked a number of design studios to submit proposals. Even though a number of these submissions showed promise none were chosen. It was now early November.

On the evening of Saturday, February 26, 1994 the director of the Bureau of Heraldry received a phone call at his home in Pretoria. The caller instructed him to be in Capetown on Monday morning for a meeting in the office of the Minister of National Education. Here, a five person Technical Working Group was to be formed to deal with the issue of a new flag. The

Group would report to the National Symbols Committee which was now under the control of a recently formed Transitional Executive Council (T.E.C.)

Two T.E.C. members were to provide oversight, Roelf Meyer and Cyril Ramaphosa representing, respectively, the government and the ANC. (They were, at the same time, the chief negotiators hammering out the now-famous Interim Agreement leading to the recent all-race elections.) Meyer and Ramaphosa essentially were told to "pull the chestnuts out of the fire" by having the Technical Group "solve the problem." The job of Convener of this group fell to Mr. Fred Brownell, Director of the Bureau of Heraldry, the official State Herald. He was given until the end of the week to come up with a new flag.

Although Mr. Brownell has plenty of experience, having served for seventeen years, he described the subcommittee's order as "a tall one since the National Symbols Commission had not been able to resolve the issue in the previous six months." But he did possess the basic germ of what became the accepted design. "It had actually come to me in August of '93 while attending an International Flag Congress in Switzerland. I just suddenly had a little flash of inspiration while sitting in a meeting.

"In 1990 I had been involved in the design of a new flag for Namibia. Knowing that a similar type of request probably would come for South Africa, I had, in fact, for four years been wrestling with the idea of something that might work. Originally, I had not submitted any design to the National Symbols Commission, though, because of a conflict of interest. I had decided to keep out of it."

In the first meeting of the Technical Working Group its members discussed color combinations, bearing in mind what had come out of the Commission and the design studios. Here they picked what colors seemed to be most popular. They also discussed the question of trying to build into the design the healing idea of convergence or interlinking.

Two days later, on March 2nd, Brownell was able to bring before the Technical Working Group four designs he felt were within the framework delineated at the first meeting. "The following week we were asked to do a fifth design. It was circulated by the politicians to their people and taken to the Cabinet. Ultimately, this design was chosen and approved by the T.E.C. on the 15th of March, 1994."

The new flag consists of six colors: red, green, blue, white, black and gold. Brownell describes the flag saying, "The central design begins as a V at the flag post, in both the upper and lower hoist corners. It then comes together in the center of the flag from which it extends as a single horizontal band to the outer edge of the fly. This can be seen as representing the convergence of diverse elements in South African society which, hopefully, then take the road ahead in unison. At one hand this is purely an interpretation. But this idea of convergence and unification also links up rather nicely with the motto of our national coat of arms which means Unity is Strength [*Ex Unitate Vires*]. "The idea was that people should see in the flag what they wished to see. No symbolism is attached to any of the colors. And, in fact, I think no universal symbolism should be attached to any color."

It *is* possible, though, to draw historical connections. The red, white and blue undeniably covers the British period and the Union Jack. Green, black and gold first came into use in South African national flags in the 19th century: the Transvaal Republic introduced green into their flag, black was first used in the flag of the Boer republic of the Land of Goshen and Stellaland, another Boer republic, used a gold star. It is true, however, that today these colors are prominent in the flags of political parties, particularly liberation movements.

There are four manufacturers producing official orders with another five or six making the flag for private and commercial sale. In many cases manufacturers have been running

double shifts to meet demand as production was delayed to the last minute. When the T.E.C. approved the design on March 15th they were then required by the constitution to ask the President to issue a proclamation. The T.E.C. squabbled for four weeks on the question of 'Which date would be most acceptable, politically, to introduce the new flag?' Ultimately the proclamation was issued one month later on the 20th of April and the flag came into use, with the new constitution, immediately after midnight on the morning of the 27th.

By the next morning most newspapers had illustrations of the new flag. Dr. Russell T. Hill, a South African engaged in research at the University of Maryland Center of Marine Biotechnology was home visiting Natal Province and Capetown at the time. "I first saw it at a cricket match at Newlands (cricket ground in Capetown). The design had been announced the night before. There was a woman in the crowd, actually it turned out there were several, who had the new design painted on her face! Talking to people you could sense a fair degree of animosity toward the new flag, at that point. Some were saying it was too busy, that there were too many colors, etc. However, you must know the environment; cricket is still pretty much a white, elitist sport. But I, myself, like the flag. The colors are related to our traditions."

Will this flag last beyond the Interim Constitution? Opinions vary but Brownell is optimistic. "Although you can't have a permanent flag built into an interim constitution, if I must judge from the feedback I have had, I think it has a very good chance of surviving. Having been through the trouble and strife, I sincerely hope they don't change it again. OK, you have your nuts who see all sorts of weird or wonderful symbolism in it, but the broad public does seem to have accepted this flag, some with open arms and others, perhaps, a little more hesitantly."

Then there are those who take a strictly pragmatic view of human behavior. Dr. Nigel Clark, originally from South Africa and now teaching at West Virginia University said "You can't create tradition overnight," referring to the fact that people are loathe to easily and quickly accept change in something as traditional as their flag. In counterpoint, Hill agrees but believes when the five year interim period is over people will be used to the new design and decide to keep it. "You may not be able to create tradition overnight, but it *is* possible to abolish the image of a horrendus history at a single stroke. This change lifts a weight off many South Africans, particularly those of us who are white and living abroad. It's a great feeling. For the first time in my life it's good to be able to wave a flag I can be proud of!"

Written for
The Washington Post
Opinion
1994