

# The real face of Pik Botha

*An apostle of the apartheid state who was prepared to serve a black president*

SHANNON EBRAHIM

PIK Botha was, above all else, the smiling face of the apartheid regime, from the time he was appointed foreign minister in 1977, the year in which Steve Biko was beaten to death.

Botha was the tonic Prime Minister BJ Vorster gave to the world to sell apartheid with his good humour and irresistible charm. And charm the West he did, successfully delaying the imposition of sanctions against the apartheid regime until 1986.

Former apartheid security branch operatives enjoyed revealing the regime's dirty secrets in the post-apartheid era. PW Botha and FW de Klerk's super spy, the notorious Craig Williamson, claimed that Botha did all the arms deals with the French, a claim he had strenuously denied.

Williamson outlined the details of the government's Operation Condor, which was allegedly a major sanctions-busting arms deal. According to Williamson, the government was happy with the success of Operation Condor, and Botha had organised that Jean-Yves Ollivier, the most powerful kingpin in the political and business networks of Françafrique, be decorated with a medal in 1987.

But rumours have always swirled about Botha's proximity to the arms industry and his history of sanctions-busting.

In Evelyn Groenink's riveting book *Incorruptible*, which was published earlier this year, she quotes from an investigative piece about the mafia in Africa which claimed, "In the 1970s and 1980s Pik Botha was at the epicentre of all mineral, military and trade-related activities in the region... When Pik was foreign minister, the SADF was a veritable diamond mining company, conducting covert military and mineral deals."

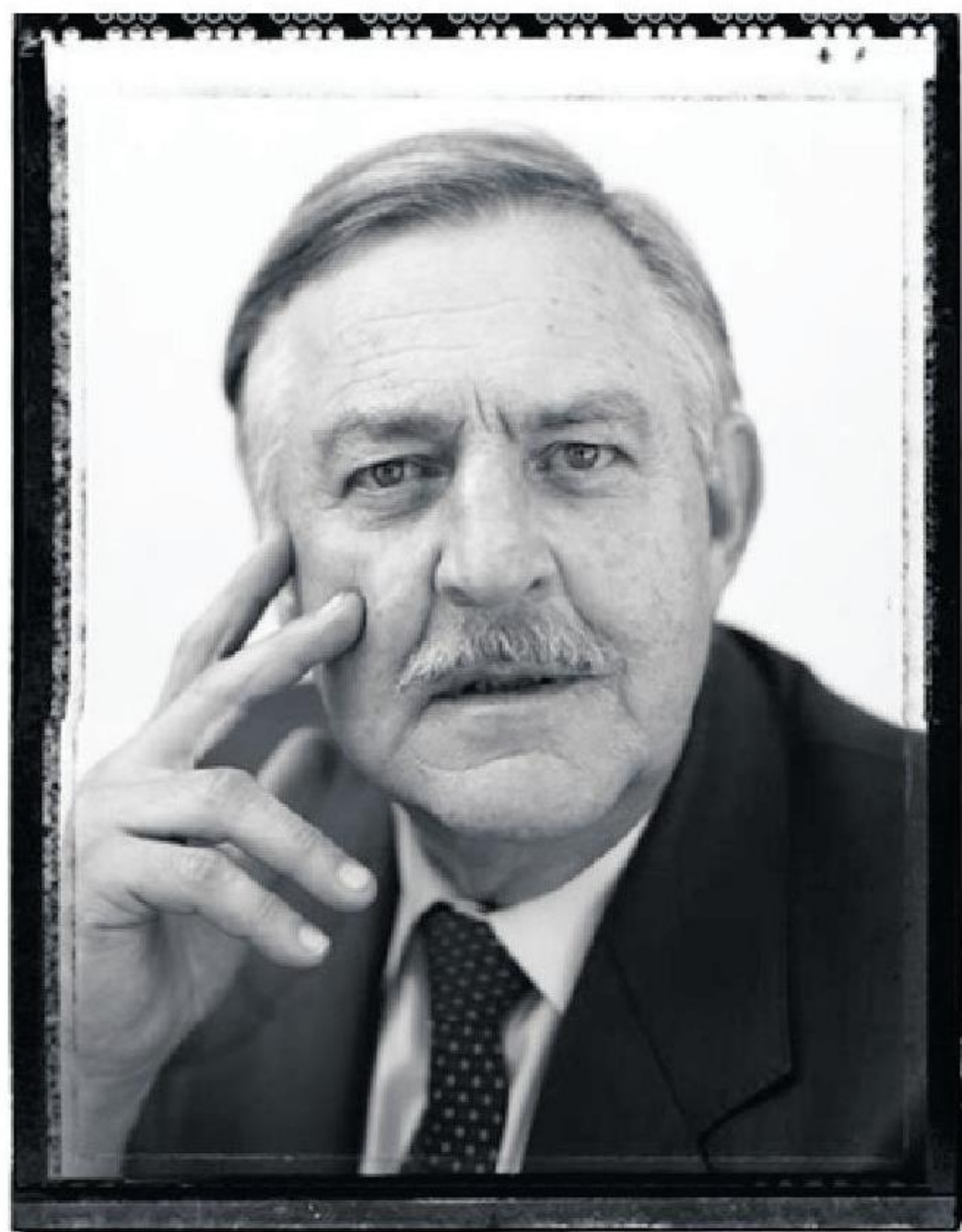
Botha was outraged by such accusations when the book was published.

Questions have also been raised as to the extent to which Botha was involved in the destabilisation of the front line states, and his potential role in, or knowledge of, cross-border raids in which members of the liberation movements and civilians were killed.

Security Police General Johan Coetzee testified at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that he had once sent men to courier a request to Botha for his approval to attack an ANC settlement in Botswana.

According to Coetzee, Botha had signed the death warrant, and the subsequent Gaborone raid had killed 12, including a 6-year-old boy. It was an open secret that Botha's confidant had for many years been Military Intelligence chief Neels van Tonder.

In 2000, Botha had participated in a panel discussion on Robben Island between former prisoners and former apartheid decision-makers and operatives such as Dirk Coetzee.



ROELOF Frederik "Pik" Botha  
1932-2018

After the dialogue, and while standing at the Cape Town docks, Botha had come face to face with the former head of the ANC's military political committee in Swaziland from the mid-1980s, which proved to be a rather awkward moment.

While Botha had claimed that he had nothing to do with the comrade's abduction from Swaziland in 1986, and that it had been the work of the National Intelligence Service, he did, however, boast that he knew the comrade's underground nom de guerre, and was keenly aware of the members of the Security Branch who tortured him following his abduction from Swaziland.

According to former Security Branch policeman Paul Erasmus, who had worked at John Vorster Square from the late 1970s, Botha was a key part of the Stratcom machinery in the early 1990s.

"As the minister of foreign affairs Pik Botha was one of the four arms of Stratcom; he was on the State Security Council and was well versed and knew everything that was going on, and chose to deny it," Erasmus said.

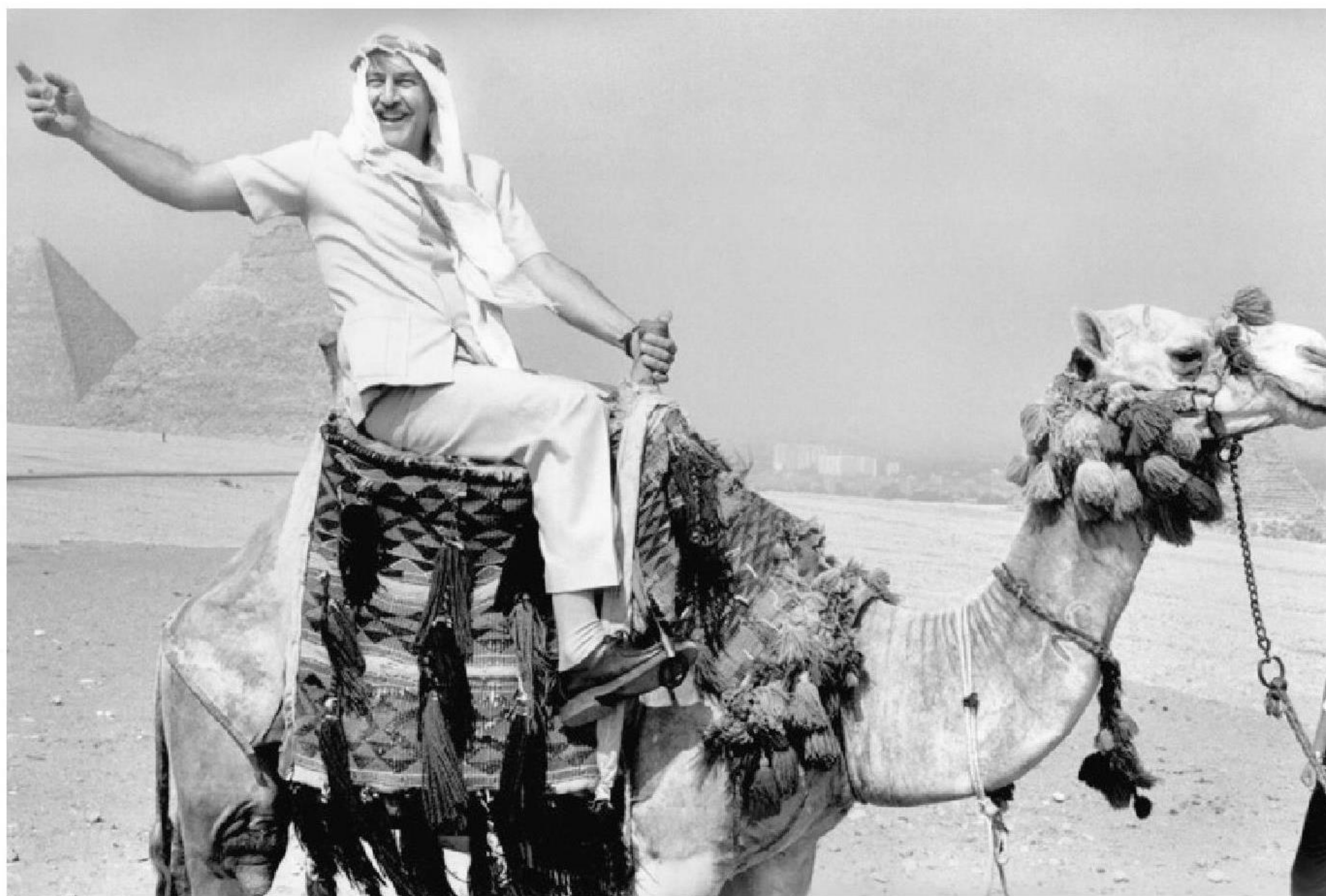
But those who worked with Botha had a very different view of him, especially diplomats within the Foreign Affairs Department who knew him over many years.

Botha was highly regarded for having helped negotiate the tripartite agreement between South Africa, Angola and Cuba that granted Namibia independence, and saw the withdrawal of foreign forces in Angola's civil war. This was despite the fact that he had been a key member of the South African team that went to the International Court of Justice at the Hague in earlier years to defend the country's rule over South West Africa.

Veteran diplomat Gert Grobler, who worked with him over many years on matters related to Europe



IFP leader Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi, President FW de Klerk, and ANC president Nelson Mandela chat at a news conference on April 19, 1994, in Pretoria, when Buthelezi and his party agreed to end its boycott of South Africa's first all-race elections. Standing behind, from the left, are Foreign Minister Pik Botha, Roelf Meyer, the chief government negotiator, and the ANC's secretary-general, Cyril Ramaphosa. | AP | ANA



A FILE image of apartheid-era Foreign Affairs Minister Pik Botha during a visit to Cairo in the 1970s. | African News Agency (ANA Archives)

and Africa, in particular Angola and Mozambique, had this to say about his former colleague: "Although Pik Botha has received much credit for his role in the Namibia/Angola issue, he, together with the late Professor Marinus Wiechers, played a critical role in bringing an end to conflict in Mozambique in October 1992."

"Pik Botha was a consummate diplomat and formidable negotiator, respected by both friend and foe. He was a patriot who dearly loved South

Africa, an incredibly hard worker, totally committed to serving his country and his people," Grobler has said in the wake of Botha's passing.

Chester Crocker, the former American Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, had said of Pik Botha: "In a way his personality always struck us as larger than life." When Botha had been posted to Washington he had developed a relationship with Crocker, who had coined the term "constructive engagement".

Botha loved to tell Americans they had no right to moralise about race.

He had once said, "Senator, some of us strongly believe that Americans are the last people that can go around the world preaching morality. What we are doing to the blacks in Africa today is what you have already done and continue to do to the American Indian."

But in a more enlightened moment in 1986, Botha had told the press in Cape Town that he did believe there would be a black president in South Africa in the future, and he was prepared to serve under him.

President PW Botha had publicly reprimanded him for saying this in Parliament.

Rusty Evans, the director general of the Department of Foreign Affairs during the transition, had at the time been Pik Botha's right hand man.

According to a news report following Evans's death last year, it was said that although Evans was close to Botha, he had sometimes questioned his judgement.

Evans had recalled how Botha had met US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to discuss the apartheid government's planned invasion of Angola in 1975. According to Evans, Kissinger had led Botha to believe that if South African invaded Angola the Americans would not oppose it. The feeling was that Botha had been a little gung-ho in interpreting the American position.

When I met Botha a few months ago at (rather ironically) the Russian national day reception in Pretoria, he had enthusiastically relayed to me his encounters with former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher at her Chequers residence.

He saw Thatcher as an ally with whom he had developed a close personal friendship.

"My former wife and I used to spend the occasional weekend with Maggie and her husband at her official residence. Typically, Maggie and I would end up talking for hours in the one living room, while my wife and her husband would talk in the other living room," he said.

I had subsequently teased Botha that I knew all about the lavish parties he would host when he lived at the historic Newlands House in Cape Town, when he was foreign minister.

Veteran employees at the Department of Public Works had told me of the parties of 500 people that Botha would host under a marquee in the gardens at Newlands House, all at taxpayers' expense.

There is no question that he was a grand socialite and diplomat extraordinaire, but undeniably always an apostle of the apartheid state.

*Ebrahim is Group Foreign Editor*