

The Agony of Colin Powell

A Dramatic Monologue In One Act

William A. Cook
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This one act play is a work of fiction. The Protagonist and the characters he presents on screen are fictional characters as well even though they are named after living persons currently holding positions in the government of the United States. No attempt has been made to accurately penetrate the inner thoughts or feelings of the living man, Colin Powell. Indeed, Colin Powell may not be able to do that although he is in a much better position than I to attempt such a feat. The Colin Powell in this play is a representative character, not unlike Everyman, who must face his inner self, having lived a life contrary to the values, principles, and morals that had governed his behavior before his ascent to the pinnacles of power. The Colin Powell in the Bush administration has appeared at times to openly confront the decisions that drive this administration, yet has always backed down, accepted the necessity of the acts, or remained silent in acquiescence of them. That behavior gave rise to the intent of the play as it seemed to eloquently represent an individual in crisis -- duty versus self. The play is a fictitious portrayal of a person in spiritual and emotional agony confronting his dark night of the soul.

The Agony of Colin Powell **A Dramatic Monologue in One Act** **William A. Cook**

Scene: A five star hotel suite close to the UN building in NYC. The room opens from the main double doors at the rear of the stage. The entrance offers a crescent table to the right of the entrance and a door to the bedroom on the left. A few steps from the door there is a step into the main room. It offers a large "L" shaped couch set, end tables with elegant lamps, a credenza with appropriate liquor bottle and glasses and a lounge chair. There is a desk of some size to the left with a desk chair, a computer, phone, etc. A huge TV screen is visible on the sidewall. A full length mirror hangs next to the entrance doors facing the audience. Faint elevator music can be heard riding quietly over the set.

As the curtain parts, a shuffling of feet and muffled voices can be heard outside the door. The door opens with a flourish as Powell comes into view. He's dressed in formal overcoat and scarf; he carries an attaché case. As he enters the room, he appears to dismiss someone with a rapid gesture of his free arm. He grabs the doorknob as he moves through the opening and slams the door fiercely, muttering as he enters, visibly upset. As he utters the words below, he has moved toward the desk on which he hurls his attaché case, throws his coat over the chair, and moves to the lounge chair pulling at his scarf as he goes. He's dressed in full business suit, but tears at his tie and collar as though he's ridding himself of a prison uniform or slave's rags.

POWELL:

GOD damn! God DAMN! Won't this ever end?
What madness am I mired in? What slough is this?
What lures me to this swamp, this pit of despond?
Where I drown in hopeless depression?
Alone! Oh, so alone!

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Would that I could
Slough off this role that smothers me,
Hides me from me, for God's sake,
And I become a buffoon, a comic player
Mouthing the words of idiots, fools,
That mock those they claim to serve.

[He rises from the chair, shirt now open to the waist, and prances in imitation of Bush's strutting as he mocks his Pretend Texas drawl exaggerating Bush's sense of superiority as he plays the "common man."]

"Now, you know what the man wants, Powell,
I mean, you know what he wants ta he'ar.
He wants you to tell him its OK to kidnap...
Well, maybe not kidnap, maybe, help Aristide
Get safely out a Haiti, to save his life,
You know, 'cause we're the good guys!
We need you there, Colin, cause you's
The black guy that knows what's good for them.
And if you say it's OK, then it's OK!"

[He returns to his own voice, and in fury speaks the following lines.]

Mouthing the words of idiots; the fool
That plays his part, then departs to play
The fool again to the plaudits of the powers
That pull the strings that make me twitch

[He suddenly grabs at his chest as a real pain hits. He stops talking and lets the moment pass. Then he speaks the following lines in a subdued meditative reflection.]

Where have I buried everything I longed to be?
What road led me to this barren place?
Why do I do what I do when I can see
That it has blackened my soul and whitened my face?
Have I succumbed to such hypocrisy
That I can no longer trace
The roots that hungered to be free,
That gave purpose to my being and to my race?

[He grabs the remote and turns on the TV to find the evening news. He watches in silence as the anchorman turns to the UN story of the flight of Aristide out of Haiti. No one seems to know where he has gone or why, just a desperate flight to safety done with American aid. The cameraman turns to his interview with Powell, the administration's spokesman on the issue. He explains how Aristide's life and those of his family were in danger and the US offered him a flight out of the country. He explains that Aristide had signed a letter of resignation and the US was acting in a

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true humanitarian spirit to help the beleaguered President. He shuts off the TV and tosses the remote on the couch]

[Mocking himself.]

That is the most influential "Oreo" in the Nation!
Colin, "Oreo," Powell! Black
On the inside, white on the outside,
The inside-out cookie, baked in a white oven!

[He reverts to dialect as he responds to his own image on the screen.]

'Who is dat man? How come he look like me?
He sound like me, but he not be me!'

Oh, how I wish that were so,
That I might rest in the black night
Knowing I had deserved the sleep
That crowns those who fought the good fight.

But sleep eludes me, escapes my grasp
As though it were a convict on the loose,
And I the Pink Panther's stumbling fool
That follows the rule to its inevitable end,
An ironic ridicule of reason and civility.
The face before the camera, quiet, assured,
The very cadence of civilized man
Explaining the unexplainable in measured
Tones that none would dare to question
Lest they appear the fool!

[He moves to the desk, opens the attaché case and rummages inside pulling papers and disks from its innards. He appears to be searching for a specific disk. He locates it, turns to the computer and inserts the disk. The images come on the big screen. He lands in the desk chair. It has wheels so he can move around on the upper floor and he enjoys this mobility.]

Ah! Got it!

Fools caught in the act!

[He gleefully points the remote at the screen. Cheney's face appears.]

Here, here's the Iago with infernal sneer,
Tilted head, and varnished voice;
The asp in the ear of the mannequin,
That slips its hateful venom

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Into that vapid space, unknown
To a mind grown dull in time,
Doltish from drugs and drink.

What demonic demands does
He inject into that dummy?
What mind possesses such scorn
For the common man called to slaughter?
What evil ego glows so deep
In the cauldron of his soul
That he can send the innocent
To their death without remorse
Even as he slides guiltlessly
Beyond the killing fields he creates?

This! This face must I face
Each day, feign joy
In its presence, bestow my obsequiousness
Like some sheepish lapdog
On this grotesquerie that leers
At the world from behind its
Sadistic mind, sick with desire
To control, aye control – not
Just a man, but the Goddamn world!

To this I bow, the house nigger
That ties his fortune to white power
Cause he knows the whip's sting
Awaits should he turn against
Those who gave him entrance
To the hollowed halls that control all!

How high do I rise!
Ah, so far, the cries of those in chains
So long ago are but whispers now,
No longer the lingering lamentations
Of kindred souls searching for one
To right the wrongs they endured.

That was me when I was young,
Full of vinegar pulsing through my veins,
Afraid of none, hero to all!
I lived the Goddamned dream!
Naive perhaps? No! No! Ignorant!
Stupidly believing it was there for me;
A dream for whitey only,
Dressed in lies, wearing a black face,
Mocking my every step as I crept

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Up the ladder, rung by agonizing
Rung, and lost my soul!

[He lurches for the remote and desperately points to the screen for another picture.
Cheney disappears and the screen goes blank.]

Enough of this gargoyle
Whose slimy thoughts drip
Over his protruding tongue
And fall like acid drops below.
Another, I'll have another
To sooth my smoldering anger.

But first, I need an elixir
To drown this gnawing pain
That strains at my gut
Like some knife of shame,
A two edged blade bloodied
By deeds done in silence
And lies told to hide the truth.
It twists inside cutting honor
As deeply as it does my heart.

[He lifts himself from the rolling chair, and as he does so he instinctively grabs his gut
as if in pain, and makes his way to the decanter where he pours a tall glass into which
he tosses a couple of ice cubes. He takes a long drink letting the liquor slide smoothly
down his throat. He moves silently and dejectedly to the "L" shaped couch and points
the remote.]

Now! Now there's a face!

[Wolfowitz' face comes on the screen. He leans forward looking intensely at the
face.]]

Conceited, conniving, coarse,
No! More! Warped, obsessed;
Ah, yes, obsessed and diabolical,
The Rasputin of our noble court!
Out of his pen pours prejudice
Garbed in learned jargon,
Absolute in its oblique assertions
That turns the simple mind
That rules this misguided nation.

That, too, must I bow before,
Lest I offend the ass to which
His nose is hooked, browned

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By years of cowering subservience
To hold the pants of those in power!
If I grovel, how much more does he?
But I know it; he cares not
For he has no morals, nothing
But the void beneath that face.

What evil has he perpetrated
And forced on a beguiled nation!
What deceit lives behind those eyes,
A veritable nest of maggots
That lives on lies,

Yet he greets

The world in fawning smiles,
The very image of the candy man
Who brings hope to all,
When in fact, he is the Iceman!

God, what a bloody crew
Of blind men leads this country
Down the path to the ditch of doom.

I grow morose and cynical;
There must be laughter
To quell these doldrums
Or I go mad!

[He gets more and more animated as the following lines are spoken and rises from the chair moving around the room.]

What fool
Can I beckon to my cause?
Whose image presents itself?
I feel like Faust
In the fulness of his power
As he summoned Mephistopheles
To raise the radiant Helen
Before his eyes.

Here, here is my
Demon on call, a plastic remote
That summons the radiance of, Rumsfeld!

Now, there is grace, comeliness, charm!
A smile to bedevil the gods,

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Eyes squinting in the glare,
Of his own brilliance that shines
Forth from his eloquent mouth
In phrases picked from the Tree of Knowledge
Before the gates of heaven slammed shut.
Or so he believes in his gut.
So sad how an ego can pluck
Sense from the mind of men.

How he beguiles the press,
Who prance before his podium
Like homeless waifs in old England,
Awaiting the proffered pence
From the hands of the blessed chosen.
He regales them with known knowns,
Known unknowns, and unknown unknowns
And they scribble these pearls of wisdom
Onto their notepads like obedient children,
Ignorant of their sense while he
Loses the horror of war and terror
In jazzy riffs of obfuscation,
And they, befuddled by his merriment,
Forget the death and destruction
He came to announce to the nation.

Oh, how many talking fools bob
Before the multitudes on fluid screens,
Chortling with glee this clown's
Distortions of truth,

Fed things
That haven't happened, could not
Have happened had they sense.
They have mesmerized the people,
Who sit in silent acceptance
Of fallacies only an O'Reilly or Rush
Could conjure as certitude,
Minds made infallible by ignorance
And ego.

To think I knew them,
Knew them all before, yet yielded
To their feigned entreaties to join
The team to make "America great."
And, "Yes!" "Yes," I would have
Total control of State, free
To assert a direction and design;
The fulfillment of a dream deferred,

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The mark of the oppressed visible
To all at last as I guided the ship of State.
What a joke! What ignorance propelled me?
What made me think power
Would be handed to a nigger?
Did I think the true thought
Evaporated when the word was expunged?
Have I joined the Hollow men:
Heartless, cruel, vengeful, cursed?
Shall I ride this frightful hearse
To its ineluctable end,
Or shall I pluck myself free,
And pray I can salvage eternity?

If there is one face that epitomizes
This ship of fools, it is this!

[He points the remote and Rumsfeld disappears. In a moment, Karl Rove's face covers the screen. He moves close to the screen drinking in the features of this man. Now subdued by some hidden force, grasping his temples as if in pain, he turns toward the audience and mutters the following.]

This, this is not a face of flesh.
There is no person here, no form
That grew in time from the mewling child;
Rather this is the face of heaven cursed
To wander the earth forever;
Lucifer incarnate in our shape,
Vengeance made palpable,
Searching the destruction of God's creation;
The Mariner damned to repeat his crime
Day after day, to live its horror
Before all mankind, alone and barren,
Bereft of human kindness and love,
A pitiless wandering form without substance
Without conscience, without compassion, without remorse.

Power and control propel this monster;
Oblivious to pain and suffering
Since he cannot die again;
His life is everlasting death.
Damned to wander through the world's
Byways witness to the weeping
Mothers and children who cling
To each other despite the devastation;
He sees the love that binds, a love
He cannot share though he knows
It alone is life's fulfillment.

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Such is the power that plays with **this** putty!

[He points the remote to the screen and blanks out Rove; in his place appears that of Bush. As he continues his litany of fools, he changes the picture of Bush to depict the points he's making. Bush in uniform, Bush in a Ranger baseball jacket, Bush with a hard hat, Bush leering, Bush sneering, Bush walking the Texas walk, i.e. like someone walking through a field of corn stalks.]

Here is true comedia dell'arte,
The mask presented to the people,
And the voice that speaks through the mask,
Personified evil in the form of Rove.
America hears the self-mocking fool
And loves his bumbling manner;
But neither the fool nor the people
Know the source of his mindless banter.

This Lucifer ties two threads of fate
With magnificent dexterity:
The neo-cons' sugar-coated hate
And God's gift to humanity,
As sold by the righteous marketers
Who coat the hearts and minds
Of their idolaters with fear and prophecy.

Oh, I should raise the specters
Of all his evil horde this night,
To haunt my dreams and drive my despair
As I grope in blindness to confront
What comfort I have conferred on this crew,
That does the bidding of Beelzebub,
Casting the naive and innocent to their doom.

I can't let them escape this catalogue of hate
That spreads their images before my mind,
As they spread their lies and deceit before
The people they vowed to protect,
Images of hypocrisy garbed in the gowns
Of God's chosen;

Prophets as real
As the storied Patriarchs that predicted God's
Reign of wrath threatening his creatures
With the sword of fire to destroy those
He came to save!

Their names
Must be emblazoned on the forehead of time,
A monument to their everlasting crime:
Falwell, Graham, Robertson, and Hagee,

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The Dominionists, End-timers, and Lindsey,
All who presumed to know the word of God,
Using fear, not love, to drive their ambitions!

These deceivers drove the frightened
And afflicted to give aid and comfort
To terrorists who plagued the poor Palestinians,
Finding justice in the horror of God's
Armageddon that gave right to might
As it blessed the lies of these dissemblers.

I saw them come and go,
And met them in their temples of gold,
But said not a word of dissent;
What stubborn will kept me silent?
Why could I not speak, why not cry
To the very heavens how they betray
The compassionate Christ they claim to love?
Where have I buried my sinful soul?

[He turns to point to Bush's image on the screen, flicks to one that shows him humbly bowed in prayer, in church, eyes closed. He turns toward the audience as though to continue his meditation but shows in a grimace the pain inside. After a moment, he begins.]

There bows the born again Christian,
Self-righteous in his indignation of those
Who question his declaration of who is evil,
And who is blessed by God to lead his mission
Of salvation against the infidels that threaten
His dominion throughout the world!
In his humble hands lies the fate
Of humankind. Does he believe these myths?
Is he an imposter, a fraud, blind, or delusional?
Does the deception reside in Rove's artifice
Or do I serve a man of infinite deceit?

Certainly I am to blame for this.

[He uses the remote to bring up a picture of Bush in his guard uniform.]

I chose to serve the chicken hawks,
The very image of those I once decried,
Cowards who send the young and poor
To serve in their staid, whole bodies
Used as organs to salvage the rich!

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What images come to mind
Of Cheney's snarl, face to face
With the sergeants' call to pushups!
Wolfowitz and Perle bedecked in ribbons
That flow over their protruding guts,
While Junior wades through fields of mud
On his way to the local pub!
What visions of security they portray!
Perhaps it's better they not serve,
But rather salute real men in battle array.

Yet to him and to them I pay homage,
To Hollow men come to life;
No longer the forgotten images
Of Eliot's barren waste, but
Bones fleshed in cynicism and hate.

[He shuts off the remote, and in quiet dejection moves across the room to the full-length mirror. His face reflects the pain that flares up from time to time throughout the monologue. He turns to look at himself in the mirror, back now to the audience, though they can see his front in the reflection. He begins to speak in a quiet but deeply meditative manner.]

Eyes I would not dare to meet
In death's dream kingdom,
I greet in full obeisance,
Like some Mas'sr of old,
With shifting feet and eyes to the ground,
The invisible man shuffling around
Lest I be flung from these citadels
That I breached these many years ago.

Oh, God, what years I have devoted
To duty and dedication that it should
Come to this night of reparation,
Where I confront myself, defeated
And alone, like some aged penitent
That shambles toward the confessional,
Trembling and terrified that absolution
Will be denied and death will not come;
But morning will, and every store window
Will tell of deeds done in silence
Truths not told, defiance put on hold.

I stand here before the only face
That must confront the faces it has met,
That must judge itself, not them,
For they are but ghosts of my own decisions

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Or indecisions that have wrought the chaos
That plagues me this night.

Now must I play priest and penitent,
Conjure up points in time that
Pricked my soul as I capitulated
To those who held my future
By a tether, like Edward's spider over the flame,
Ready to drop me into the perdition
Of lost opportunity and advancement,
To breach the walls of whitey's fortress,
After four hundred years of sweat,
Of humiliation and defeat, to subvert
From within the very system that controlled
The oppressed and determined their fate.
That was the dream that turned to nightmare.

[He wanders before the mirror, weaving back and forth as he unfurls these lines, stopping to look at himself, sometimes with an expression of deep depression, sometimes pain, physical pain that finds visibility in his breast or temples. It is as though he is mirroring his emotional state in the deterioration of his body.]

I know the day and hour of my defeat!
It was a sin of omission, of known
Horror untold, of cold bodies
Buried beneath the clay of My Lai.
I knew and said nothing, and learned
That silence has its own rewards
For those in power, who control others
By controlling what they know.
That omission earned me stars,
And forged the first link in my chain
That grew like Morley's day by day
Until I was fettered as solidly as any
Of my forebears who served as chattel
For that civil society that shackled the slave.

[He stands before the mirror and buttons up his shirt, straightens his collar. He stands at attention, shirt tucked in, belly pulled in, looking at himself and imagining his early years in uniform.]

I cut a pretty picture then,
A useful tint to present to the public,
Carefully manicured in my ribbons and stars,
The perfect image for the Party of the people.

Used, used as only Patricians use the slave:
I dressed out their dining hall,

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I stood, impassive and pressed, beside
Their elegantly dressed wives bedecked
With pearls and diamonds ... and gleaming smiles.
I knew my place and kept it well,
Adding, day by day, a new link
To the chain that choked my conscience,
Shutting out the air of reason and right,
As I crawled home each night
To seek solace in darkness,
Ah, yes, to crawl out of the light!

[He slumps down on his knees, head bowed like the penitent.]

How corrupt have I become?
Do I act now without regard
For right or wrong?

Do I
Instill my desires on my own kin?
Do I link them to my chain, prisoners
Of my foibles, victims of "duty's" excuse
That releases me from judgment to acquiesce
To those who pull my chain?

Oh, I am not Prince Hamlet, in deed,
A pun as corpulent as my dejected mood;
I'm not even Lord Procrastinator,
Who has at least the prospect of becoming;
I have forgone all, lost the chance to act.
I have become the victim of Cheney's venom,
Just another mannequin to be placed
In his window, dressed to do his bidding,

[He rises from his knees and goes for another drink. As he stands at the credenza, his hand begins to shake and the liquor spills. He grabs at his breast. Puts the glass down hurriedly, and stumbles to the couch edge. A little time passes and then he begins the following gaining momentum as he speaks.]

Why, if I am content to be his lackey,
Do I suffer so?

I tried, I tried to stop
The first slaughter that ended
In the Highway of Death, that graveyard
Of bleached skulls and seared skin,
Our everlasting memorial
To that glorious little war,
That made me a household name.

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But once started, I did nothing to stop it.
No, that's not true, I did do something;
I supported it, lying to myself
That duty required I obey;
The pitiful lie all must use
Who follow the bloody trail
Their master takes.

 That lie
They knew I would tell myself,
And so I became both Master and slave!
What irony rules a life
That turns the whip upon itself.
That blackness in evil seals my fate!
Shackled to duty I abhor,
Champion of slaughters demanded
By those I hate, the loathsome horde
That guides this benumbed state!

That time passed, and I pushed
My guilt deep inside that I might hide
It from myself.

 But it festered there;
It haunts me now; it grows a cancer
In my breast and taunts my being.
It metastasises, for God's sake,
Because it multiplies each day I
Live in this den of vipers who
Entwine their lies like serpents in a nest,
Strangling my will, my desires, my soul.

[He is circling the stage at this point as though tracked by some unseen fury. He grasps his temples at times, desperate to flee the torment he is recalling.]

How I gagged when Rumsfeld shoved
Those sheets of deception before me;
Page upon page of distortion and invention,
Equivocation and evasion, presented as truth
To beguile the world by this Charlatan,
Who coquettishly delivered the Judas kiss
To those he admired, the very diplomats
That cried out against the Machiavellian
Antics of this Satanic crew!

Then, too, I objected when I threw
Those sheets against the wall,
Demanding they give me evidence,
Not concoctions hatched by sick minds,
That, once delivered, makes me their Pharisee.

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Yet Pharisee I became,
Presenting their law before
The world's court, mouthing their lies
As truth, while my innards burned!

Had I then stood against their will,
The very heavens would have given thanks!
And the chains, the chains that bind
Even now would have fallen
From my heart and sunk like lead
Into the swollen sea.
And, blessed God,
I would be free!

But now I walk the world a clown,
Bush's buffoon, believed by none!
Pushed around the globe to justify
Neo-con hypocrisy, a roving dummy
Doomed to drive an agenda of destruction.

Ah, what self-hate sits like ice in my breast,
Freezing my heart against the pain
I witnessed in Jenin, as Sharon's siege
Laid waste the destitute and helpless;
People oppressed, damned by indifference
And deceit to suffer in the sun's glare
The cruel savagery of these fiends.
I, I live their pain, captive of these same
Demons, and I suffer with my brother.

Yet I did a dastardly thing
When I circled their plight,
Taking unnecessary flight to Egypt,
That Sharon have time to ravage their homes,
And massacre the mothers and children
Who could not flee the terror of his wrath.
The whole world cried in despair
As I crawled slowly to the carnage
That I let happen for their sake,
Adding still more dead to the links
That I drag weeping into eternity.

Why can I not act?
What makes me cow to those I loath?
What force drives this shame?
For force it is that compels me to live
In a cauldron of self-hate, yet go forth
Each day to build another crime

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More hideous than the last,
To approve the wall that stands
A monument to racist hate, encircling
Those held captive by murderers and thieves;
To cry foul when the world court
Condemns the ethnic imprisonment of people
Unable to defend themselves against oppression;
To proclaim as justified the stealing
Of Palestinian land negating by my act
The declared will of nations united in voice
Against this insidious betrayal.

Good God, what reparations must I make?
To whom do I make them now?
Have I a soul to save?

I have lived this dark night
In fear and dread having cast
My lot this day with tragic irony
As I stood alone, the bumbling Patsy
For this pathetic crew, escorting
Democracy out of Haiti!
Kidnaping it
In the dead of night, a tragicomic Knight,
Destined to be mocked and derided,
A figure of infinite ridicule and scorn!

How fitting this end to this ignoble career.
What message does it send?
Am I at least an example that can teach
The folly of impregnable duty,
Of deeds done in silence that corrupt,
Of deceit made truth that corrodes
The decency we've been taught,
Of dreams deferred and lost?

When pride rides its phantasm steed,
Seeking the golden apple of greed
And gain, and power, believing it
The elixir of life, time intrudes
To erase the mirage, leaving only
A residue of lost hope and desire.
Oh, God, I would I were dead!

[He collapses on the lounge chair, arms spread, head on chest as the curtain closes.]