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RHODESIA The Tobacco Curtain

When the British declared their array of embargoes against rebellious Rhodesia, the moment of truth that would bring down Ian Smith's white regime was expected to arrive when the tobacco crop came in—and the nation's tobacco farmers would find themselves unable to sell it. Smith had other ideas, however, and they emerged last week when the annual five-month tobacco auction opened in Salisbury.

To beat the international ban on Rhodesian tobacco, Smith threw a tight security net around the normally raucous auction sheds, cut prices and offered wildcat buyers guarantees of absolute secrecy. Gone were the chanting auctioneers, the throngs of spectators. Instead, armed guards turned away all unauthorized visitors, and the floors last week were empty except for a scattering of watchful officials and carefully anonymous buyers wandering through the rows of heaped leaf. There was no open bargaining; transactions were quietly conducted by government agents, and anyone caught leaking information about sales was subject to two years in prison.

Smith's tobacco curtain seemed to be paying off. There was no way to tell how the sales were going. But Salisbury hotels were filled with buyers from all over Western Europe and even Asia. In any case, tobacco farmers could not lose very much, for the government had guaranteed purchase of this year's entire crop if necessary, at prices only slightly lower than last year's. To the chagrin of the British, economic disaster seemed as far away for the Smith government as ever.

As for that other major embargo, the ban on selling oil and gasoline to Rhodesia, it was faring no better. Smith's friends in South Africa and the Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Angola have been openly smuggling in enough petroleum to keep his industries running, his trucks on the road and his taxis on the streets. So heavy

has been the flow of oil, in fact, that the government may have to cut it off for a while. “There is more oil in the country than we can find space for,” said one oil company official last week.