

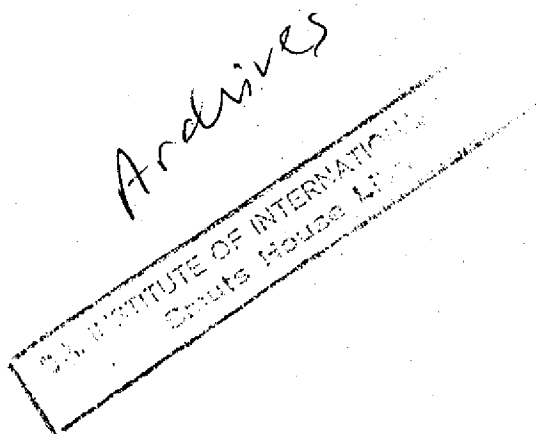
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THE BUSH  
PRESIDENCY  
AND  
SOUTH AFRICA:  
CONGRESS  
AND THE  
SANCTIONS  
OUTLOOK

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It should be noted that any opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author and not of the Institute.

**THE BUSH PRESIDENCY AND  
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SANCTIONS OUTLOOK**

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## PREFACE

The only thing more difficult to predict than South African politics is American politics, but I hope to make a few forecasts based on my reading of the Washington policy environment. This is a particularly cheeky enterprise when you consider that US policy under President Bush is still under review, congressional tactics for the coming year remain in a formative stage, and a new Assistant Secretary for African affairs has yet to be appointed or confirmed. All I can suggest is: *caveat emptor*.

I hope that you will indulge my instincts as a former journalist if I start out with my general conclusion, and then step back to demonstrate how I reached it.

## INTRODUCTION

My main conclusion is this. Contrary to the reports I have read that assert that US policymakers are becoming disillusioned with sanctions, I believe that the inauguration of George Bush marks a new acceptance in Washington of sanctions as a legitimate and necessary tool of American foreign policy toward South Africa. Under Ronald Reagan, the debate revolved around the issue: 'sanctions - yes or no'. From now on, I suspect, the debate will address a quite different question: 'sanctions - when, how many, and under what conditions'.

## BACKGROUND: 1986 SANCTIONS

Let me step back for a moment to 1986 in order to trace how it is I arrive at this conclusion. In 1986, the US Congress adopted, over President Reagan's veto, the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act (CAAA). The legislation imposed a variety of economic penalties on South Africa, and at the same time outlined in some detail the conditions that would have to arise to permit the US to lift sanctions. The measure remains among the toughest adopted by western countries in the effort by anti-apartheid proponents to make minority rule in South Africa unworkable.

Without at this point going into the details of the act, I think we can learn some lessons about the current debate by reviewing the politics and process by which the CAAA became law.

In 1986, South Africa was experiencing township uprisings. In Washington D.C., the debate over American policy toward South Africa quickly turned into what was in effect a 'congressional uprising'. It is important to remember that, in general, Congress does not often or lightly take on a president in the field of foreign policy. From time to time it engages in a sort of hit-and-run attack on a specific foreign policy budget item, ambassadorial nomination, or arms agreement, but only very rarely does it mount a wholesale assault on a basic element of the administration's international relations agenda.

In recent decades, this type of congressional rebellion has occurred in only a handful of cases: under Presidents Johnson and Nixon, it was the Vietnam war; under President Carter, the SALT II arms control treaty with the Soviet Union; under President Reagan, US intervention in Nicaragua and policy toward South Africa. They occur, very simply, when the president's policy so significantly diverges from public opinion that large numbers of elected legislators judge that they pay unacceptable political costs for endorsing it, and instead reap rich political rewards by defying it.

In 1986, Ronald Reagan was aware of growing public pressure to toughen his 'constructive engagement' approach to South Africa. He knew he was facing the possibility of a politically damaging congressional uprising, but for at least three reasons, Reagan was prepared to do battle with Congress rather than compromise.

First, there was a policy motive. Reagan sincerely disagreed with those who wished to employ sanctions against Pretoria. Although he had backed the use of economic pressure against Cuba, Nicaragua, Iran, Syria, Poland, and the Soviet Union, and he would later endorse a near total economic boycott of Panama,

he was on record as arguing that sanctions against South Africa would drive Whites to the right and cost Blacks jobs. Wedded to the policy of constructive engagement, Reagan was set against efforts in Congress to usurp his prerogatives.

Secondly, there was a domestic political motive. The White House felt that standing firm on constructive engagement would earn the administration credit among US conservatives. Many were becoming increasingly disgruntled with Reagan's failure to make significant progress on their social issue agenda - items such as pressing for school prayer, outlawing abortion, and ending affirmative action. Some top administration aides felt that a high profile defence of Reagan's South Africa policy would attract anew conservative admiration and support of the President.

Thirdly, there was a power motive. Reagan felt confident that in a showdown with Congress, he would win. After all, he was coming onto the battlefield with formidable strengths. In 1986, he was a five-year incumbent, recently re-elected by a landslide, and enjoying massive popular support. Moreover, he had the security of a US Senate controlled by his own Republican party. Pundits were describing Reagan as the most powerful chief executive since Roosevelt.

On the other side, however, legislators favouring a new policy on South Africa could point to considerable assets of their own. For one, public awareness of South Africa's internal troubles was rising to a peak in 1986 as the media entered its second year of almost daily coverage of resistance and repression in the townships. Calls for tougher US action against apartheid were being heard across the country, and grassroots organisations campaigning for sanctions were channelling this public frustration into direct pressure on congressmen and senators. Mainstream public opinion was shifting strongly to the conclusion that the Reagan policy had veered from America's commitment to human rights and its hard-won dedication to racial equality.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, advocates of a new policy made a compelling case that the majority of South Africans were pleading for the United States to take tougher action. Proponents argued that sanctions, by increasing the economic costs of apartheid, conveying a strong message of international disapproval and continuing to isolate the country, could over time help to persuade rising numbers of Whites to support change.

By contrast, supporters of constructive engagement, who were burdened with defending the status quo, could muster few examples of the policy's success. P.W. Botha had provided few rewards for Reagan's troubles.

In the end, of course, President Reagan suffered a rare and humiliating defeat. More than two-thirds of both the Democratic House of Representatives and the Republican-controlled Senate endorsed the CAAA. In a head-to-head confrontation, the White House lost effective control over US policy toward South Africa.

In looking at the policy prospects for the next year or two, let us bear in mind the balance of forces which brought about the 1986 result. In 1989, the strengths and weaknesses of the three major actors are quite different. Let us examine each of them: the President, the House of Representatives, and the Senate.

#### PRESIDENT BUSH AND SOUTH AFRICA

In contrast to Ronald Reagan, George Bush comes to the South Africa issue in a politically vulnerable state. Remember that Reagan entered his second term on the heels of a landslide victory over Democratic challenger Walter Mondale. Bush won the presidency in the 1988 election by large popular and electoral vote majorities, but it is critical to bear in mind - because the political experts in the White House do so - that distortions caused by the electoral college voting system mask what was actually a very close win by Bush over Democrat Michael Dukakis.

The fact is that in the dozen or so states which could have given Governor Dukakis the White House, Bush won by only a few percentage points. Bush captured the conservatives, which is normally easy for a Republican running against a liberal, because such voters have nowhere else to go. But Bush's formula for winning depended on his appeal to moderates and some liberals, whom he wooed with his call for a 'kinder, gentler nation'.

There are implications here for policy on South Africa. Unlike Reagan, who in 1986 was a second term incumbent barred by the Constitution from running again for president, Bush must calibrate policy based on his political needs for the re-election campaign of 1992. And let no one think that November '92 is too far away to influence today's decision-making. Only three years from this month [February 1989], the presidential election season will open with nominating caucuses in the state of Iowa. That means the real campaign begins a year before that - in just twenty-four months. The Bush White House is going to be very concerned to make policy in ways calculated to retain his support among moderates and some liberals. He may regard the South Africa issue as a way of helping to meet that objective, since many mainstream American voters remain supportive of stronger anti-apartheid measures.

Unlike Reagan, Bush also comes to the South Africa issue with no obvious commitment to a particular policy formula. He asked for and received no mandate from voters on how to proceed. During the campaign, candidate Bush almost never addressed the subject. His policy papers on future South Africa policy would begin typically with a statement suggesting that sanctions have been a positive factor because they have sent a clear signal to Pretoria of US abhorrence of apartheid. Then they would say that sanctions are unfortunate because they cause economic hardship for Blacks. Bush made no effort to reconcile or clarify his views, except to indicate that he would not advocate repeal of the CAAA. The result is that he is not locked into any particular direction, but he is vulnerable to pressure from any side seeking to gain control over the policy.



Bush has another problem Reagan did not have to face. He confronts a Congress wholly controlled by the Democrats. Remember that not only did Bush fail to bring Republicans in with him to Congress last November, Republicans actually lost seats even as their standard bearer was winning the presidency. As a result, the Democratic Congress considers itself the 'co-winner' of the 1988 election, with a mandate just as important as the President's.

It must be said, however, that the cards are not all stacked against George Bush. In fact, the President holds some cards that Reagan did not in 1986. For one thing, he can point to a foreign policy success in Southern Africa - the Angola/Namibia accord. During the presidential campaign, candidate Bush used this diplomatic achievement as a defence against calls for sanctions. Economic pressure at this sensitive time, he contended, would risk the pact and imperil the prospects for an independent Namibia. As President, Bush can be expected to use the same argument - at least for a time - to counter pressure for sanctions on Capital Hill.

Another factor in Bush's favour is that public awareness of and concern about the South Africa issue has diminished considerably since 1986. This leaves him with more political room to develop and sell a new policy less drastic than that backed by Congress in recent times.

Finally, the President has inherited an important new relationship with the Soviet Union. This opens up fresh possibilities of joint superpower action on South Africa undreamed of when Reagan and Congress confronted each other in 1986.

#### THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND SOUTH AFRICA

Let me turn now to the House of Representatives, which in the past has been the launching pad for anti-apartheid legislation.

As you know, the Dellums Bill passed the House in 1988. The measure, which was opposed last year by every Republican presidential candidate but endorsed by every Democratic presidential candidate, would have imposed a near full-scope trade and investment boycott of South Africa. Interestingly, the Dellums Bill was adopted by a large majority in the chamber, even though the administration fought it with what seemed to be a compelling argument - that its passage would torpedo the Angola/Namibia negotiations. Representatives appeared to conclude, on the eve of the general elections, that the voting public remained supportive of tougher anti-apartheid measures by the United States.

In my view, there is one respect in which the fortunes of the Dellums Bill have improved in the House in 1989. Representative Bill Gray, a Democrat from Philadelphia, has recently been elected to one of the top leadership positions in the House. The move makes him the highest ranking black legislator in the United States. Gray has been one of the key supporters of the Dellums legislation, and his ascent makes it much less likely that the House leadership could block or sidetrack an anti-apartheid measure this year or the next. By way of background, in 1988 some Dellums supporters charged that Speaker Jim Wright attempted (unsuccessfully) to trip the Bill up by steering it through numerous committee and subcommittee hurdles before clearing it for consideration on the floor.

By most other counts, however, it seems unlikely that the House would pass another Dellums Bill this year. For one thing, House advocates of anti-apartheid legislation are tired of passing tough bills only to see them fail in the Senate. They have seen this pattern in 1985, 1986, and again last year, when the full Senate never even voted on the Dellums Bill. These congressmen do not relish the notion of spending time and effort on a fourth attempt without being confident of greater Senate support for an anti-apartheid package. They want advocates to focus their attention on rebuilding a Senate coalition favouring sanctions legislation.

For another thing, many House Democrats are inclined to grant the administration a honeymoon period on Southern Africa. They seem prepared to wait and see what Bush has in mind for a new policy toward South Africa, and to test how willing the White House will be to cooperate with Congress. In addition, a large number of mainstream legislators lean toward delay on new sanctions until Congress has a better sense of whether Pretoria intends to follow through on allowing Namibia to hold free and fair elections, and to declare its independence. If South Africa balks, these congressmen would be inclined to take action. But if things go well, they may back a tacit moratorium on new sanctions for at least this year, while they see if Pretoria makes major changes at home.

A final factor working against 1989 passage of major anti-apartheid legislation is that representatives are feeling less political pressure to act. Public awareness on South Africa is down, and the Free South Africa movement is rebuilding grassroots organisations with an eye toward the 1990 election year. Congressmen will likely not feel much political heat, nor perceive significant political gain from a sanctions bill, until next year.

#### THE SENATE AND SOUTH AFRICA

On the South Africa issue, the US Senate has always been less inclined to intrude on administration prerogatives. Regardless of which party has controlled the chamber, it has been more attracted to compromise rather than to confrontational measures. The reasons for this are both structural and political.

First, in the House, the chief advocates for anti-apartheid legislation have been unabashed liberals and black representatives, but in the upper body, there are no black senators and precious few unabashed liberals. Most senators represent much larger and more diverse constituents than their counterparts in the House, and therefore tend to act more cautiously.

Secondly, the Senate contains no body comparable to the House Africa Subcommittee, which has launched most of the anti-apartheid bills. On paper, it is true, the Senate has regional subcommittees attached to the venerable Foreign Relations Committee. But, compared to the House, these are regional subcommittees in name only, at least the way the Senate is currently organized. The Africa Subcommittee, for example, has no separate staff, no separate offices, and has held no separate hearings. Consequently, all Africa-oriented legislation must compete for time, attention, and staff resources against every other foreign policy issue for action in the full Foreign Relations Committee. This represents a structural bottleneck for proponents of aggressive lawmaking.

Thirdly, since January 1987, the chairman of the Africa Subcommittee - in theory, the Senate vicar of Africa legislation - has been Illinois Democrat Paul Simon. Yet for most of 1987 and half of 1988, Simon was preoccupied with his campaign for the presidency. In addition, he was relatively new to Africa policy and needed time to gather knowledge and experience before playing a leading role in anti-apartheid debates.

For these reasons, the Senate proved in 1988 more persuaded than the House by the Reagan Administration warning that new sanctions would threaten the Angola/Namibia accords. While the Dellums Bill - after considerable delay - squeaked out of the Foreign Relations Committee on a party-line 10 to 9 vote, majority leader Robert Byrd then declined to bring it to the floor of the Senate before the session came to an end.

In one important respect, however, anti-apartheid legislation advocates have a new key asset in 1989. As in the House, a rare leadership change has occurred in the Senate. Maine Democrat George Mitchell, who is one of those very few unabashed liberals to still exist in the Senate, recently won an election as the chamber's new majority leader. In this post, he can have enormous influence over the Democrats' agenda, and over what measures get through to the floor for votes. His

predecessor, Senator Byrd from West Virginia, a relatively conservative legislator, had not been known as an enthusiastic supporter of anti-apartheid legislation. Mitchell's election could make the leadership an ally of those pushing for new sanctions. On the other hand, the majority leader is going to need some time to consolidate his power enough to play an important part in such a legislative offensive.

Apart from Mitchell's elevation, the anti-apartheid movement's assets in the Senate are few - at least at the moment. Senators are hearing very little these days from their constituents on South Africa. Partly as a result, the upper body is very much inclined to extend the administration a honeymoon period on Africa policy. It wants to wait and see what policies Bush will propose on South Africa. It will watch carefully how the Angola/Namibia accord works out. It may put tough new sanctions on hold while seeing if the new National Party leadership will meet the Congress's bottom line demand for all-party negotiations on a post-apartheid future.

The most likely scenario in the coming months is that the Senate will keep sanctions simmering on the legislative burner through policy and confirmation hearings. But, in my view, in the absence of dramatic new developments in South Africa or Namibia, 1989 is not likely to be a year when the Dellums Bill passes the Senate.

Nineteen-ninety, however, could be quite different. George Mitchell will have settled into his leadership post. The anti-apartheid movement will have had time to reenergise grassroots pressure on senators. The Angola/Namibia accord will have been largely implemented. Legislators will have had some time to test Pretoria's new leaders. Paul Simon will have had more experience as leader of the Senate's anti-apartheid advocates.

Perhaps most importantly, 1990 will be an election year. Unless George Bush succeeds in selling an alternative policy to the American public, or unless dramatically positive changes

occur in South Africa, legislators may return to the hustings to find their constituents continuing to support sanctions against apartheid.

#### POLICY PROSPECTS

So much for the strengths and weaknesses of the parties engaged in formulating US policy toward Southern Africa. Now let me move on into the riskier business of making a few predictions based on these assessments.

George Bush is not likely to put South Africa high on his list of foreign policy priorities, particularly in comparison with Europe, Japan and the Soviet Union. But the President does, I think, have several important objectives that a new policy toward Pretoria would be designed to achieve.

First, President Bush sees South Africa as the next logical step in testing the possibilities for US-Soviet cooperation in resolving regional conflicts. Washington and Moscow worked together closely behind the scenes on the Angola/Namibia accord, and the two governments now seem to share many of the same goals with respect to South Africa. Bush may explore working tacitly or openly with Gorbachev to craft joint strategies on apartheid.

Secondly, Bush is a multilateralist. Reagan had the US go it alone on Angola - he abandoned the Western Five Contact Group, was the only leader to support Jonas Savimbi's Unita, and unilaterally sponsored the negotiations over Angola and Namibia. Bush seems more interested in having the US cooperate with its allies, and in particular the UK, rather than in sustaining Reagan's 'lonesome cowboy' approach. I suspect he recognises that one of the great problems with international policy towards Pretoria is the cacophony of messages emerging from the world's capitals on apartheid. My guess is that he will try to work on ways to synchronise US policy with those of Britain, the European Community, Japan and Canada.

Thirdly, Bush wants perhaps above all to avoid a battle with Congress over this issue. He knows full well that he will have many other conflicts over matters he cares far more deeply about, such as the budget or defence policy. Bush will want to keep his powder dry, to conserve his political strength for other issues rather than expend them fighting for a South Africa policy.

Finally, Bush may see the South Africa issue as a way of demonstrating his 'kinder, gentler nation' credentials to liberals and the American black community. The President's choice for Republican Party chairman, Lee Atwater, has stated that one of his top objectives will be to expand Republican support among Blacks. Taking a tougher line than Reagan on apartheid could serve as a means of doing that since Blacks generally support more active US opposition to minority rule in South Africa.

Putting this all together, I think we can envisage a new American policy toward South Africa which involves the Soviets, cooperates with US allies, and meets Congress halfway. What it will be called is anyone's guess. I have heard of 'democratic enhancement' and 'black empowerment', or perhaps it is 'black enhancement' or 'democratic empowerment'. It may involve an increased commitment of funds, though there is little money in the Treasury these days for anything like a 'Marshall Plan'. But the policy will have to include some carrots, be they diplomatic, political or financial in nature - and some sticks.

As far as the sticks go, I think it likely that Bush will have to accept the use of economic pressure in some manner, or else face a revolt in Congress, probably next year. He may suggest some targeted sanctions early on, or he may pledge to adopt certain sanctions later, in the event that Pretoria makes insufficient progress in meeting some specified conditions. But for Bush's policy to be credible in Congress, it must be tougher than Reagan's, and that means some form of admission that economic pressure plays a role in American policy toward South Africa.

If the forthcoming Bush approach does not admit the legitimacy of sanctions, or shows little chance of achieving significant results, Congress is likely to reclaim control over South Africa policy in 1990.



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