

# **SOUTH AFRICA AND U.S. POLICY**

**Robert I Rotberg**

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The conflict in South Africa is for respect, dignity, participation, privilege, human rights, and civil liberty, as well as access to and the wielding of power in its rawest form.

The making of United States policy respecting a struggle which has so many close analogies to its own ought to prove easy. But instead it has been enormously difficult, for South Africa, albeit white-ruled and afflicted with the cancer of apartheid, is a strong nation, rich in resources, locally dominant, Western in character and alignment, and historically an associate of the West. Moreover, the United States has long traded with and invested in South Africa. Despite the obvious injustice of apartheid, the United States has been both reluctant and unable to abandon ties and influence or to attack blindly without knowing what would follow. The US has wondered whether or not moral repugnance alone offered a solid and sustainable basis for the development of workable American policies. Furthermore, the precise location of United States self-interest has always been in question. So has efficacy: If the test of self-interest could be met, would the policy succeed in changing South Africa for the better - presumably making it more humane and just, and providing for the fuller participation in power of the majority?

The nature of the conflict in South Africa is well known, and little changed in essentials.<sup>1</sup> From a US perspective, South Africa seems permanently at war. Its 22 million Africans are subordinated politically, economically, socially, educationally, medically, and in every other conceivable way to the 4,7 million whites who rule South Africa as they have rule it since the seventeenth century. In addition whites still control the destinies of the 2,6 million Coloureds and 0,8 million Asians.

One aspect of the war is white hegemony. The white government, recognizing the enormous disparity between white numbers and African numbers, fears the kind of shifts in power in its country which would diminish its own preeminence and/or transfer even a scintilla of prerogative to Africans. Thus whites, who have always controlled the governments of South Africa, refuse to give Africans a vote in the national political arena, limit African freedom of movement from the countryside to the town or among towns, make them carry and produce identity documents or passes, closely regulate where they can live, be educated, worship, how they can travel, and, from 1949 to 1985, with whom they might cohabit. For the same reason the white government restricts the citizenship of Africans in South Africa, and has created ten homelands where Africans are primarily intended to enjoy political and other privileges. In US eyes other nations oppress their own people, and discriminate against them in one or more ways, but South Africa is the only one which does so exclusively on the basis of colour.

Coloureds and Asians are also subject to nearly all of the exactions of apartheid, with an important qualified exception. In 1984 the white government changed its form from one with a Westminster parliament and a ceremonial president to one consisting of an executive president and a legislature consisting of a tricameral parliament with one dominant house for whites and lesser houses for Coloureds and Asians. Americans know that Coloureds and Asians now vote, but only for representatives to their own racial chambers. They are also aware that Africans still are denied the vote, except in the homelands and in some colour-restricted townships.

The other side of the war is expressed through black resistance to white domination and subjection. There is sullen, passive rejection of whites, which occurs every day. There is public criticism of the government by a number of harassed political groups like the United Democratic Front, the Azanian People's Organization (Azapo), the Soweto Committee of Ten, the Forum, and so on. Within the white parliament, too, the Progressive Federal Party attacks the apartheid policies of the ruling National Party. Another major indigenous opponent of white rule is the long-banned African National Congress (ANC), a Soviet-backed guerrilla movement which infiltrates South Africa from outside and periodically sabotages government-owned or government-related installations. Since 1977 the number of incidents has multiplied 200-fold, many insurgents have been captured and tried, South Africa has increased its anti-guerrilla patrols, but the spate of attacks on property, and occasionally on individuals, (including black attacks on collaborators) continued largely unabated notwithstanding the declaration of an official State of Emergency in July 1985.

The clash between white and black is for South Africa, but it is not yet a clash of culture (since both sides are Western), of religion (both are more or less Christian), or of ideology (despite the Marxist associations of the ANC). It is a fundamental, basic clash between peoples differentiated solely by colour whose overriding grievance is the denial of their birth-right and full participation in a country which is theirs, and their white rulers, who want to continue to retain their leading position (and their wealth, privileges, and way of life) in a country which is also theirs. Most whites simply refuse to believe that the strong, rich country which they have run for so long (with African labour) can or will remain the same (for them) if Africans share or hold power. Thus prejudice is less the basis of the clash than is a fundamental rivalry for power, and for all that power means in the modern world.

The overriding issue which today separates Africans and whites is, in its starkest sense, political representation. Whites, especially those in government, are prepared now more than ever before to modify the exactions of apartheid in many ways providing that their own power is in no important way eroded. Africans, who welcome increased economic opportunity, the freedom for the first time to form and join trade unions, and a modest provision of social services, insist that they will never be appeased by

less than the franchise, and thus at least a meaningful portion of basic political power. They want what they have always wanted - basic human rights in a country which was theirs before the whites came, and in which they were systematically deprived of privileges and power by the might of whites.

Beyond South Africa, US interests may conceivably have been served by the forcible South African elimination of intra-regional conflict. With the end of South African assistance, however limited, to the Ndebele rebels in southwestern Zimbabwe, the incipient civil war there has largely been quelled. South Africa claims to have ceased its thoroughgoing involvement with Renamo in Mozambique. Except for South African raids, Botswana is peaceful. South Africa has not lately attacked little Lesotho. Swaziland is calm, at least on the surface. South Africa has backed out of Angola, except for occasional covert operations. Most of all, certainly from the South African and probably from the US official point of view, the influence of the Soviet Union in the region and on the conflicts of the region has been minimized effectively by the Angolan-South African cease-fire and the signing of the Nkomati agreement between Mozambique and South Africa. The Soviet Union has been shown to be powerless - a paper tiger, even if only temporarily - and to be unable to help Mozambique, Angola, or SWAPO in their times of need. If a patron cannot assist its clients in a crisis, of what value is patronage?

These recent regional accomplishments may or may not prove to be contributions to the peaceful evolution of southern Africa. To the extent that they do contribute, they serve the aims in Africa of United States foreign policy. But the fundamental conflicts remain. Moreover, in South Africa itself the urban riots since September 1984 testified to the meaninglessness of white-imposed notions of reform for Africans. It was evident to Americans even before the Emergency that the newly introduced South African constitution and its tricameral parliamentary configuration hold no particular relevance for Africans. Nor had Africans reacted favourably to proposed new urban arrangements. With the tightening of controls on unions, the harassment of the UDF, the detention of black leaders, and the government's disavowal of any desire to improve the political position of Africans, most blacks were as disenchanted as ever with the practical workings as well as the philosophical underpinnings of apartheid. As far as they were concerned, nothing fundamental has changed. There were increased economic opportunities and broader social possibilities - but more so for the black elites and the middle class than for most Africans. Conceivably Africans could derive some political benefit from the participation of Asians and Coloureds in the new parliament, but most Africans (and most liberal whites) continued to doubt that those groups will ever play a meaningful legislative role in a parliament dominated thoroughly by whites loyal to the National Party. The State of Emergency consolidated such critical views.

The external aspect of this same conflict between black and white in South Africa still exists. Despite South Africa's successful assault on ANC basing privileges in Swaziland and Mozambique, and its equally skillful chilling of sanctuary possibilities for the ANC in Lesotho, Botswana, and Zimbabwe, guerrilla attacks show no diminution in quantity or quality. The ANC still survives to destroy fuel storage tanks, government offices in several cities, critical strategic facilities, and so on. Moreover, in the eyes of the mass of blacks, the imprisoned leaders of the ANC are more popular now than in the 1960s and 1970s. According to several different respected opinion polls, Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, the ageing, originally militant leaders of the ANC, are the overwhelming favourites of the inhabitants of the black cities and townships. Everything that the white government of South Africa has done to combat the ANC since 1976 has instead enhanced its status, and given Mandela and Sisulu the glory of folk heroes at home and in the US.

Beyond South Africa's borders the positive accomplishments of recent months still leave smouldering wars in Angola, Namibia, and Mozambique. At the core of all these rivalries, even that of Angola, is the persistence of apartheid. Moreover, the only standing that the Soviets still have in the region is as an opponent of white domination. They lack credibility as a donor or investor, but they do give funds and arms to liberation movements. If the United States is concerned about the Soviet and Cuban threat to stability in southern Africa, and the links which such a threat must continue to have to larger, global antagonisms between East and West, then apartheid is the prime obstacle to a significant reduction in East-West tensions in much of Africa.

The strategic aims of US policy, despite some tactical changes, are nearly the same as they were in late 1980, before the presidential election of that year. Very little of a positive nature, in other words, has been achieved during the past five years. Indeed, from the critical perspective of Washington, the years from 1980 to 1985 have set the region and black interests in South Africa distinctly back. White South Africa is more powerful locally and regionally than it was in 1980. Its regional might is unchallenged in a way which was unthinkable in 1980. Yet the economic and social conditions of its neighbours as well as the economic, social, and political conditions of its internal black majority are now more worthy of commiseration than they were in 1980. Economic mismanagement in the black countries, climatic misfortune, and the sad world currents of economic reverse have all played crucial roles in the neighbourhood, but so have the economic and military assaults of South Africa. Within that country, too, the performance of indicators of black economic growth have been spotty. Certainly life in the homelands, where there is abundant malnutrition and overcrowding, is demonstrably poorer. So, too, is it in many cities and towns, where housing and other social services have been curtailed, squatters attacked, and the noose of apartheid tightened. Nor can apologists show solid evidence of new political opportunities in South

Africa for Africans. The crux of all debates is political participation, and in that fundamental, as in so many other aspects of apartheid, nothing has changed in substance since 1980. Many categories of complaint can be termed more damaging. As the simple goals enunciated by Bishop Desmond Tutu in 1984 and 1985 remain unmet, so must conflict deepen in South Africa and episodes of violence cascade upon the people of that land. From the West's point of view, South Africa's apartheid remains a charge on both its conscience and its self-interest.

The Carter administration sought to curtail conflict in southern Africa and accelerate the abolition of apartheid by castigating and isolating South Africa. It fulminated in private and public. It threatened the imposition of unspecified sanctions. It shunned trade, embargoed commodities, minimized investments, and limited lending. Occasionally, it rewarded good efforts. It had a goal: progress toward full political participation by all South Africans regardless of colour. It suggested a means: consultation and negotiation between blacks and whites - something along the lines of a constitutional congress. But it never demanded one man, one vote, now.

The Carter administration can claim several achievements. It compelled South Africa to reverse a long-held position and admit that Namibia was, in fact, an international responsibility and was not, *de facto* or *de jure*, a part of South Africa. It persuaded the South Africans to begin a process of negotiation over Namibia's future which, even if it still limps along, has already resulted in a series of agreements which could, someday, lead to an internationally validated establishment of independence.

Harder to demonstrate is the impact of the policies of the Carter administration on internal improvements in South Africa. The significant labour reforms which were begun then owe at least some impetus to Western criticism. One perceptive South African commentator claims that there is no doubt "that the threat of sanctions, boycotts and disinvestment played a role in deciding Pretoria to give trade union rights to blacks."<sup>2</sup> Western carping also encouraged the discussions, however flawed in their ultimate execution, that led to the construction of a new parliament which now includes representatives of dark-pigmented people. Perhaps the Carter policies prevented more relocations and removals than there were, and the razing of fewer rather than more squatter camps.

Perhaps South Africa deferred the destabilization of its neighbours until President Carter lost the election of 1980. Or perhaps the timing of much of the military action against South Africa's neighbours reflected changes in official thinking and military tactics which were unconnected with the shift in American policy.

Whatever the etiology of South African resurgence in the 1980s, there is no doubt from the US perspective that in 1985 South Africa's armed forces are



stronger and bolder than they were in 1980. None can dispute their willingness to attack and successfully overawe their neighbours by one audacious raid after another. Indeed, in 1983-84, they faced down the Soviets, and won. Toward the end of the Carter years South Africa did raid SWAPO bases in Angola. But the wholesale adoption of this tactic, and the occupation of large swathes of territory, occurred during the first Reagan administration's watch. So did air attacks on Maputo and Maseru, the subversion of Swaziland, and the promotion of a wholly concocted insurgency movement in nearby Mozambique.

South Africa tried in the 1980s to give Swaziland large chunks of homeland South Africa. Near its internal homelands it relocated, removed, and shifted nearly a million Africans with impunity. It sharply reduced the numbers of persons banned, but continued (even before the Emergency) to detain and interrogate Africans for long periods without charges or trials. South African critics of their government have claimed that human rights and civil liberties for blacks deteriorated severely during the Reagan years.

At a bare minimum, the policy of constructive engagement, which was introduced with fanfare in 1981 as a break with the Carter administration's antagonism, brought little discernible improvement to the daily life of blacks in South Africa. The main components of the apartheid system - the forced removal of Africans from so-called white areas, the relentless inferiority of black education, health, and housing, and the security laws that give police virtually unlimited powers to enforce racial codes - remained intact.

Constructive engagement was designed to do what it has not - to deliver Namibia, to end globally-connected and South African-inspired conflict in the region, and start South Africa down the evolutionary road toward fuller political participation for all. Constructive engagement stressed friendship and relaxed dealings with white South Africa. As a result, and despite the Reagan administration's reiterated abhorrence of apartheid, US relations with South Africa since 1980 have been much more amicable than at any time since 1960. This closeness - this bonhomie and camaraderie - was intended to produce positive results.

Chester Crocker, Assistant Secretary of State for Africa and the well-meaning architect of constructive engagement, summarized his personal approach in an interview with a South African magazine editor. He was asked how he perceived the relationship in 1984 between the United States and South Africa, "especially in view of past posturing?" Crocker replied: "One develops personal familiarity with key decision-makers which pays dividends. We hope that we have achieved that with South Africa and with other key countries in the region. It's a two way street - a matter of developing a track record. Undoubtedly one can over time do business more effectively when one knows the people at the table, where they are coming

from, and how they tend to think and operate. We take the South African Government as an important and serious partner. We share certain goals. We see clearly where we don't agree. The past few years have been a learning process. I believe each government takes the other seriously - which has not always been the case."<sup>3</sup>

Crocker persistently rejects claims that white control of South Africa has been strengthened during his time in office. "The dynamic we see", he told The Guardian in 1984, "is one of growing debate, open discussion and ferment in the white community, but also among Coloureds and Asians." He said that the South African government "has decided to test its own power base" by broadening the nature of its parliamentary representation. He believed that the Nkomati Accord dealt "a body blow" to the illusion that armed struggle would solve South Africa's problems. The Nkomati agreement was important because it endorsed sovereignty for South Africa's neighbours as well as itself, and showed the importance of statehood and survival. It also presaged economic cooperation. On Namibia, Crocker blamed the Cubans for the failure to achieve independence. This was the rock on which constructive engagement had truly foundered. But Crocker explained: "There has to be something in it for everybody, including the party which controls Namibia today. There is no doubt in our minds that the South Africans would like to see a settlement in Namibia sooner rather than later."<sup>4</sup>

To engage South Africa constructively was naive. The South Africans, confident of the power of their Namibian hand, simply dangled the spectre of cooperation before inexperienced game theorists who had foresworn sanctions (and therefore the employment of effective sticks). Crocker and his associates were left with carrots, each and all of which the South Africans were pleased to consume. The US relaxed its commercial embargo, reaffirmed closer relations in and with South Africa. But the biggest carrot of all was the Cuban issue. To have made the Cubans hostage for Namibia reversed the entire drift of negotiations, permitted South Africa to relax, and has delayed independence indefinitely. For no Angolan government could easily throw itself on the mercy of the West (and South Africa) when UNITA remained a clear and present danger.

Crocker and his associates may still think that they can square the unholy triangle, but to believe so in 1985 is optimistic. The United States has made dozens of concessions. South Africa has been rewarded. But there has been no attempt at operant conditioning. South Africa has feared no little punishment. Indeed, the basic flaw in constructive engagement was and is its lack of an incentive structure. The concessions were made willy-nilly, in no hierarchical sequence which might have commanded South African attention, if not positive performances.

What next? It is in the self-interest of a United States government which wants to minimize conflict in southern Africa, negate the influence of the Soviet Union in that region, and encourage conditions there favourable to

rising standards of living and broader political participation (not to mention justice, equity, and human rights), to devise a new policy which will achieve short and long term results without instantly forfeiting its ability to influence trends as they develop. The US does want evolution rather than revolution to be South Africa's fate, providing that the evolution is progressive and that it commences soon and proceeds at a more than deliberate pace. It wants South Africa to remain prosperous, but in shared hands. It wants South Africa to continue producing its minerals and crops, and to play a greater and more responsible role in the politics and economics of Africa as a whole.

The test of a new policy is its ability to concentrate the mind of official South Africa - to pull or push the oligarchical state to think anew about its real options in the world, in the region, and at home. By rewarding positive trends and withholding rewards for ensuring at least verbal unpleasantness for negative departures, South Africa could again begin to appreciate the real risks of acts and policies deplored by the West. Since 1980 South Africa has borne almost no cost, suffered no shame and obloquy, and (until the Emergency) accelerated from strength to strength.

The US Congress is about to pass a set of sanctions, which will have an indirect effect at best. There are further sanctions which Congress can threaten in the fields of communications, transport, investment, and trade. If necessary, at minimal cost to the United States, those threats could be made real. Boycotts of various kinds are possible. But it is the aggregate pressure that may matter. Congress believes that these new initiatives will prove influential only when the leaders of white South Africa count the cost too high and agree to sit down to talk with the leaders of the black community.

Americans do not want to hit out blindly at South Africa; they wish to devise a carefully calibrated series of incentives to which the South African government could reasonably be expected to respond and which, ultimately, would bring about the major policy shifts which black leaders in South Africa, many whites, and many foreigners so patently desire.

The United States can, in exchange for its continued friendship, the possibility of broadened trade relations, and increased investments, expect the cessation of destabilization, a swift finalizing of the independence arrangements for Namibia, and a beginning to the long and arduous process of negotiating new internal political instructions and arrangements with representatives of the majority. It can encourage the gradual decay of apartheid and the slow but necessary integration of Africans into the fabric of what is now a powerful, privileged white society. These overdue utopian steps will be wrenching, painful, and will take time. The United States has a role not as an arbitrator, but as a catalyst and, if absolutely necessary, as a facilitator. Since any reorientation of policy, American or South African, will take time and patience, there are a few

interim postures which ought to be struck, by the official American presence in South Africa, and by the United States with regard to the South African question more generally. The US should search for the pressure points of the white society, and make it known that it does intend to push hard - but fairly - on those very spots. It ought to offer more vocal public and private criticism of South African misconceptions and missteps. Not for moral but for bargaining reasons it should have expressed US outrage as the attempt to give KaNgwane and Ingwavumaland to Swaziland. The US missed an opportunity at Driefontein, after Saul Mkhize's death, to put white South Africa on the metaphorical rack. The US can specify particular goals in the labour and industrial fields, quietly if necessary, but firmly. It can help find more funds for black schooling. The US needs publicly to resume contacts with black opponents of the white government, affirmations of friendship which have subtly been permitted to wither during the Reagan years. In other words, the US needs to take black politics seriously, an omission of recent times. The US can fruitfully employ the multinational, Contact Group formula to give even more weight to any determined approach to South Africa.

Is this an efficacious formula? Certainly a policy of carrots without sticks has been shown to be unworkable and foolish. A policy of sticks alone will, by definition, achieve nothing. There is a middle way, but whether the vicissitudes of real time and real events will permit an incentive-based, hierarchically structured, simple psychological model to achieve results in the complex environment of white-dominated South Africa is more a hope than a promise. However, in the wake of the Emergency, such a shift is imperative, and is now being pursued by Congress. If American foreign policy needs are to be achieved, and progress to be attempted in the modernizing of South Africa, the Congressional initiatives will go hand-in-hand with changes negotiated in South Africa between black and white.

NOTES

1. This essay draws on some of the material in Robert I Rotberg, "The Dynamics of Southern Africa and US Policy", in Robert I Rotberg et al, South Africa and Its Neighbours: Regional Security and Self-Interest (Lexington, Mass., 1985), 151-163.
2. Alastair Sparks, The Star Weekly, 30 July 1984.
3. Interview between Hugh Murray and Chester Crocker, "Crocker", Leadership SA, III, 2 (1984), 41.
4. Crocker, quoted in The Guardian, 20 July 1984.