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U.S. POLICY AND SOUTH AFRICA

by

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The stakes for the United States in South Africa are great. At a time when violent and destructive anti-Americanism is manifesting itself in Iran and elsewhere, we must be aware that in Southern Africa, and particularly in the Republic of South Africa, our policies today and in the years to come will largely determine whether America will receive a similar reaction in a future Black-ruled South Africa.

The United States' interests in South Africa are therefore primarily political and long-run. The Carter administration, to its credit, has recognized that. However, I am less certain that they have appreciated the gravity of the situation in South Africa and the urgent need for the United States to further distance itself from the Pretoria regime.

Political change is coming in South Africa, of that there is no doubt. Africans will achieve majority rule, the only question is when and how. That understanding must form the starting point of any constructive American policy. The Carter administration has understood this. They have realized that the major threat to American interests in South Africa is not Communism, but white racism. They have expressed a commitment to the movement for racial justice in South Africa. But

how to translate this commitment into reality is the major problem facing American policy today. It is a problem that is made particularly serious by the fact that in the past that same commitment was articulated by several other American administrations without being effectively translated into reality. Africans, both in South Africa and the rest of Africa, are aware of this and are watching very carefully to see what actions our government will take.

If we are serious about our commitment to aiding as peaceful a transition to majority rule as possible, as I believe we should be, it is urgent for the United States to put increased pressure on the Pretoria regime and to begin to withdraw the financial, moral and political support that the American corporate presence brings to the South African government. If we do not do this, Black political forces in South Africa will have no choice but to turn to more violent means for political redress, since constitutional channels are closed to them, and toward the Soviet Union for political support. In such a context, will the United States retain the will to continue to support the legitimate aspirations of the African people of South Africa? If not, what will that mean for our growing ties with African and other Third World countries who look to our stand on South Africa as a test for our commitment

to human rights.

There are two sets of reasons why such a policy has not yet been forthcoming. On one of these sets I am sympathetic with my friends in the State Department. On the other set I disagree with them.

The first reasons are political. The fact remains that Southern Africa is still seen by important policy-makers, and I am speaking particularly of Mr. Brzezinski, in terms of East-West confrontation and the idiom of detente. In addition there has been, and properly so, the greater immediate importance of the Namibia and Zimbabwe issues. Finally, in recent months, the overriding concern of the administration with the SALT treaty has tended to put all other issues, including South Africa, on the back burner.

But this does not fully explain the problem. The other set of reasons concerns the continued wishful thinking displayed by the State Department concerning what is seen to be the positive and major role that can be made by American businesses in South Africa toward the process of change.

This is not to say that American businesses have particularly evil intentions in South Africa. I do not believe that they do. Nor do they prefer the Apartheid system. I am sure that most

would rather see a system more in concordance with our democratic values.

What it does mean is that American corporations have traditionally accommodated themselves to the political status quo; that even if business were to have some impact on government thinking, and it is not clear that they do, that impact would be very unlikely to outweigh the importance of American and other foreign investment in providing the economic underpinning of the Apartheid system; that it is certainly the case that South African whites perceive continued economic involvement as a basic endorsement of the system and the directions in which the whites propose for it to change; and that, conversely, Blacks, increasingly and overwhelmingly, view business efforts as anti-liberation and pro-government.

Only when American policy-makers recognize these realities will U.S. policy be able to make the transition from commitment to action that will be needed if we are to be a constructive force for change in South Africa.

In the 1980s, with the issues of Namibia and Zimbabwe largely behind us, the South Africa issue will become the lynch-pin of our entire Africa policy. The Carter administration has taken important steps in the development of a more realistic

policy that is in line with our broad national interest in seeing an end to racial domination in Southern Africa. Yet, U.S. policy retains its historic ambivalence at a time when the political costs of that ambivalence, particularly among Black African nations, are increasing.

South Africa is the kind of issue that offers an opportunity for executive leadership and initiative. Our economic and strategic interests are not of the magnitude that create overwhelming constraints upon policy.

But action must be taken. Two and a half years ago, Vice President Mondale met with then Prime Minister Vorster of South Africa. The Vice President warned Vorster that, "Our paths will diverge and our policies come into conflict", if South Africa persists in denying basic economic and political rights to its Black population. The time for such implied threats has passed. For American pressure on South Africa to be taken seriously, the years of threats and condemnations must be acted upon in a more forceful manner.

There is a growing world-wide movement to economically and politically isolate the South African regime. The United States government should begin to become part of that movement. Only by doing so will we be likely to help to create the

context in which a peaceful transition to majority, our admirable goal, will be able to be realized.