Black Policies for South Africa

Jon Woronoff

Both reason and passion combine in making policy. When he considers his means, a strong man may threaten, take acts of reprisal, break relations and attack. A weak man may beg and cajole, appeal to sentiments, ask friends to mediate and eventually accept less than he wanted. But passion can make the weak man act as if he were strong, or the justice of his cause may lead him to feel that only a strong line is right. That, by and large, is what has happened over apartheid in South Africa. Since the 1950's, speech has followed speech, resolution followed resolution and threat followed threat. Indeed, there was too often an escalation of rhetoric that left action far behind.

The basic situation is well known. South Africa is a nation of some 22 million inhabitants, 18 per cent of them whites, 70 per cent Africans, 9 per cent Coloured, and 3 per cent Asian. Nevertheless, the white minority has maintained political control and reaped most of the economic benefits. Under apartheid, it also divided the country into areas allocated to different groups, relegating the Africans to “homelands” known as Bantustans and the others to specific neighborhoods. The races have been separated in their social, educational and sports life, in fact in everything but labor. For a vast number of workers are needed to keep the modern economy running.

Those who support the non-whites naturally see the situation in moral terms and, since one cannot beg for equality or cajole for someone’s birthright, they have tended to make demands. To back them up the liberation movements warned of guerrilla warfare and disruption from within, the independent states tried to boycott and isolate, and occasionally hinted at a major war. The only drawback to these measures, however, is that even when implemented they had scarcely any effect on a far stronger opponent. Sanctions have not curtailed South Africa’s trade or arms imports, and its police and military forces have crushed all internal and external dangers. For these and other reasons several nearby States began working out what they considered a more realistic stance and some have wondered if “dialogue” was not wiser.

These trends in independent Africa have naturally had an impact on the United States. The black community here has expressed anxiety about the poor conditions of non-whites in Southern Africa, and apartheid has been strongly denounced by many nationalists. When it came to policy, they have frequently followed the lead of the African States and liberation movements in demands for boycotts and a cessation of relations. Some of the more radical have talked of war as the only solution. But words have not always been followed by acts adapted to American circumstances. The major effort so far has been exerted by liberal and black groups, including the NAACP, which have worked to get American business to withdraw from South Africa. This meant persuading some three hundred corporations, General Motors, IBM, Polaroid, Coca Cola and the others, to forget their investments and profits and pull out. Others have tried to threaten, or plead with the United States government to break with Pretoria. Here, too, the results have been negligible.

It would have been easy enough to pursue this line further, showing at least an outward commitment to defeating apartheid. Yet, when it produced few palpable results, some leaders sought an alternative. And recently the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People adopted a policy far more in keeping with its own ethos and with the limited power it can actually marshal. Its Annual Convention in July, 1971, suggested that American com-

---

Jon Woronoff has spent much of his time in Africa in the last ten years, visiting some thirty states and working with various economic, political, technical and other organizations. He is the author of Organizing African Unity and director of a series of African historical and cultural dictionaries.
panies stay in South Africa on the condition that they "use their influence to pressure South Africa into a revision of its racist policies or to withdraw their financial investments and franchise arrangements from that country." Otherwise, "we call on our members to withhold economic support from such companies doing business with the Union of South Africa where those companies do not accede to our request that they use their good offices to bring about a favorable change in the apartheid policies in South Africa."

There were enough reasons for such action, especially if the aim was less to hurt the minority regime than to help the oppressed majority. If American business were to close down its factories many Africans, Coloureds and Asians would be out of work, while the whites (benefiting from job reservation) would be employed elsewhere. The first to suffer in any depression would be the non-whites, the first laid off or forced to accept lower pay, or perhaps even sent back to the Bantustans, would be the Africans. Moreover, American business represents only fourteen per cent of total foreign investment. The withdrawal of these companies (or some of them) would be impressive, not decisive, as they would be replaced by European, Asian or South African interests drawn by profit margins two or three times higher than they could obtain elsewhere.

Equally important is that the new investors would not question the South African way of doing things. And, with American business gone, the tenuous but real chances of influencing the corporations, and having them influence the regime, would cease. The same applies to an American diplomatic presence. As long as the Embassy is in Pretoria, it can have some influence on the South African leaders, and the black community in the United States can partially determine what that influence would be. Without this leverage the American blacks can do nothing to help.

The demands the NAACP now makes of American business are basically an upgrading of their workers: higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions. In addition, whenever possible, black workers should be given posts previously reserved to whites and with a commensurate salary. This already asks less than giving up the fat profits of operations in South Africa and will not be resisted as strongly. Even if it brings the American corporations into conflict with official apartheid policies, their presence is too important to reject for mere nibbling. In a second stage, American business could press its counterparts to grant similar treatment to their workers so as to avoid a competitive disadvantage. The back-up for this in the United States is ready at hand, and has often been used against companies that discriminated against Negroes. There would be no "boycott," far too harsh a term, merely condemnatory resolutions and selective buying by those who feel strongly on the matter. Rather than face a loss of sales in the home market, many a company might prefer limited concessions in South Africa.

On the governmental level, the Administration is no longer urged to cease its relations but rather to use those relations to press for greater flexibility and a toning down of apartheid. It could instruct its ambassadors to take a less friendly stance, and eventually include black staff members in the Embassy. At the same time, it could expand its assistance to independent Africa. Once again, these are very modest demands. Yet, nothing more could be expected from an Administration and Congress that was already ignoring sanctions against Rhodesia and reconsidering some of the older commitments on trade with South Africa. Led by Representative Diggs, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa, there are black congressmen to work for its aims. Charles Diggs, who is also chairman of the "Black Caucus," had already been to South Africa and could be expected to agree with the NAACP approach. Many moderate leaders would also do so, although most radicals still support a strong line that would hardly be implemented by a Republican, or indeed a Democratic administration.

Those who see white South Africa as a monolithic bloc adamantly imposing its policy on the masses, as a power that might be attacked and possibly defeated but never changed, see no sense in a policy
of small measures. The measures would be rejected and apartheid remain. Yet, it has been increasingly clear that the white minority is not monolithic. There are divisions among Afrikaners, Britishers and others. Along with the Nationalist Party there is a major opposition United Party, and several lesser parties, as well as many white individuals and groups that risk prison to protest against apartheid. Even the newspapers go far in criticizing government policy, while the younger generation is distressed by a system that seems to lead nowhere. The most remarkable phenomenon, however, is a continuing conflict within the ruling Nationalist Party between Prime Minister Vorster's verligts (or enlightened) group and the sarkrampte (narrow-minded) old guard. The split came over the purity of apartheid policy and Vorster's bending of its rules to establish some sort of rapport with independent Africa. Elections contested by dissident N.P. members, and usually won by the younger segment now in power, do not indicate that change is impossible.

Even among the African population there are unexpected stirrings. In some cases the lead is taken by the elected officers of the Bantustans, supposedly mere "puppets" of the regime. One of the first acts of the Zulu Territorial Authority, under Chief Gathi-sha Buthelezi, was to discard the oath of allegiance to the Republic. And Paramount Chief Kaiser Matanzima of the Transkei has been demanding that more white-owned land be incorporated into the territory. An even more serious crisis occurred when many Ovambo workers walked off their jobs, crippling the nearby mines. Much to its displeasure Pretoria had to meet representatives of the "natives" and accept some of their demands in order to end the strike. In many small ways the Africans seem to be using the little leeway they have within the system to express a new militancy.

At a less noticeable, yet more vital level, change has been even greater. The South African economy is developing at such a rate that there are no longer enough skilled white workers for all the job openings. More and more, non-whites must be used in these positions, and the newspapers are full of references to new jobs opened up to other races. In many cases, special—and lower—categories and rates are established for non-whites, but they are earning more than before and are that much more essential to the economy. Further improvements would normally come from an organization of labor, only this is forbidden the non-whites, who cannot join white unions nor form their own. There are, nevertheless, works committees that speak for them and are tacitly recognized by management.

Another significant change in South Africa is the willingness to receive non-white foreign visitors. This includes heads of state, ministers and, the last week in March, Roy Wilkins. Since the NAACP was forming a new approach, its Executive Director felt he should study things on the spot. Rather than take advice from the usual spokesmen of the South African people, he wished to visit the country, speak to the people and find out for himself. During his stay, Mr. Wilkins was lodged in white hotels and accepted as an "international visitor." He slept and had some meals there, even inviting local non-whites to join him for dinner. During the day he was able to tour factories of American companies and black townships to see how the people lived and worked. Not surprisingly, he was shocked by the terrible living conditions and unnaturalness of the separation of races. The constant presence and power of the policeman is oppressively evident. And he left South Africa more disturbed by the system than before.

Mr. Wilkins's main concern was for the lot of the Africans, Asians and Coloureds. He could hardly speak to local leaders—aside from chiefs—since the system makes it impossible to organize. Thus he often spoke to chance acquaintances in farms, factories and stores to see what they thought. They helped convince him that despair was not in order and that they could be helped in small ways. The key to everyday existence, like that of the blacks in America and working people throughout the world, is the pay check. If they bring more money home, their life is somewhat better; if they are laid off, their hopes for a decent life are shattered. Pass laws, separate facilities, Bantustans are shameful and vexing, yet less vital. Although Mr. Wilkins made no contacts with the government while in South Africa, he spoke to many whites in the opposition, including the head of the United Party, de Villiers Graaff. Their comments
seemed to indicate dissatisfaction and willingness to compromise. For the fate of the whites is not very enviable either, trapped in an unworkable system that leaves them in many ways the captives of the non-whites. They have the power to control the situation for some time, not for ever. One day they may have to pay. For all their guns, tanks and airplanes they are less relaxed and more worried than the others. They, too, could benefit from a new system, sharing the country fairly among all its inhabitants, for the good of all and not any one race.

Thus the Executive Director returned to the United States with a strong feeling that the NAACP was on the right track. There is change in South Africa and it makes sense to precipitate further change. This is easiest in the economic sector, long recognized as the Achilles heel of apartheid. Here the exploiter is more concerned with profits and efficiency than a system he may consider secondary or even reprehensible. (The managers are more often foreign or of British background than Afrikaners.) An improvement in pay and condition is easier to induce than political reform and brings some relief. Finally, this policy is similar to the traditional approach of the NAACP. After 63 years, it still brings together half-a-million men and women who reject violence and revolution and believe change can produce peaceful channels to the mutual benefit of the races.

But change does not come about on its own. And Mr. Wilkins assumed an activist stance when he met the press on April 7. "We cannot," he repeatedly stressed, "we cannot keep running away from the problem." The black community must do what is within its power to help, it must "use the unique talent of twenty-two million blacks in the United States, the votes they have to influence the policy of government." Economically, blacks must express their feelings toward companies that did—or did not—heed the call to upgrade their non-white workers in South Africa. This takes a lot of work and organization. It implies stepping up previous efforts and undertaking concrete action.

Yet the greatest challenge is to withstand . . . success. For there are immediate signs of approval from big business, followed by pledges and statements that for years they have been upgrading their workers. Although Polaroid's efforts are known, it is uncertain whether most companies make more than token adjustments in the hope of being left alone. Thus, for the policy to mean anything and ultimately to overcome the gaping inequalities, it must be followed up and controlled by objective machinery, perhaps a committee including both supportive groups and business. There is also a possibility that the United States Departments of Commerce and State, which prefer this new policy, may try to dilute it.

Is the NAACP taking the easy way out? In one way, certainly not. By adopting a moderate stand it unleashed far more criticism of the NAACP than if it had been militant. For many people the picture of Roy Wilkins driving through the crowd in Johannesburg already made him look like an apostle of the regime. His words, as reported in the New York Times, led to a hue and cry from the backers of a hard line. He was accused of defending American business interests by the American Committee on Africa. A more radical group, the Committee of Concerned Blacks, issued a statement to "reject any dialogue with South Africa which is not concerned with the abolition of apartheid itself and the enfranchisement of the Africans, Coloureds and Asians." There would have been no such trouble if the NAACP had merely paid lip-service to the old policies.

The NAACP is also out of step with official African bodies, led by the Organization of African Unity. And it is under attack from certain elements in the South African liberation movements. So far, most non-African organizations—whether church, liberal or black—have accepted the usual policies, insisting that Africans decide for themselves what must be done. The most noticeable spokesmen are obviously the leaders of the parties in exile. Many of these leaders have been abroad for quite some time and no longer share the discomforts of the masses. But it is otherwise impossible to know how the non-whites feel—unless, of course, one goes to South Africa. By bypassing the leaders and consulting and interpreting the views of the "people," Roy Wilkins aroused much enmity. He is accused of betraying the courageous men and women who risk their lives to defy the system. However, the important question is how well he understands the needs of the many more who accept a system they can change only slowly.

Thus the NAACP has clearly adopted a very challenging and controversial stand. Whether it was wise to move from a strong to a less strong line has yet to be proven on the basis of two criteria: actions and results. All too often in the past strong language was equated with strong action when, in fact, it merely masked an inability to act. Over the coming years we will see whether the moderate approach leads to new rhetoric or concrete action. Then the results for the millions living under apartheid will have to be assessed. Yet, even if it now looks less impressive than sanctions and force, the new policy does have something in its favor—it is feasible.