Report From South Africa

John T. Pawlikowski

We are heading for the last of the gracious societies. The United States stands on the threshold of collapse. The last bastion of freedom and anticommunism is to be found in the Republic of South Africa. These were the views of a recently transplanted American sitting behind me on the flight to the RSA. After two weeks of visiting various parts of the country—the KwaZulu homeland and the cities and townships of Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Durban, plus a sideline look at the situation from nearby Swaziland—my traveling companion's evaluation of South African society leaves, in my judgment, much to be desired.

Articles in the Western press have seemed recently to herald a new era in white South Africa's attitudes toward its black neighbors. Prime Minister John Vorster was now meeting with government officials from several black African countries, such as Zambia and the Ivory Coast. At the same time, he was pressuring Ian Smith to negotiate with the black movements in Rhodesia. And his government was advertising a new tribal homelands policy, including the coming "independence" next year of one of the homelands, the Transkei, as a real advance in freedom and equality for South Africa's black population. But after talking with missionaries, residents of the homeland of KwaZulu, educated black clergy and lay people in the cities, and various officers of the South African Bishops' Conference, one is forced to conclude that, despite the external opening to the black African nations, the situation of the black person inside the country has actually become worse. The government crackdown on dissidents among students and groups like the Christian Institute has intensified in recent months. And while "petty apartheid" (racial separation in restaurants, hotels, beaches, and other public places) may be disappearing in a few places, there is still a long, long way to go even in this realm.

It is crucial for those in the West, particularly in the United States, not to be deceived by the new cosmetics that Mr. Vorster is trying to sell the outside world. Granted there are some whites in South Africa committed to change. Maybe, just maybe, Vorster might be genuinely interested in moving toward a multiracial society. Perhaps he is ahead of his people in seeing the writing on the wall. But all this seems wishful thinking at present unless some more substantial changes occur in South Africa. Blacks still cannot vote, they cannot own property, they still cannot live in the cities but only in the dusty townships and even more inhumane compounds on the metropolitan fringes, and they continue to be prohibited from forming unions. About the only significant improvement has come in black wages, which are on the rise. But they were so low to begin with that, combined with the soaring rate of inflation, the gain has been minimal. Black men still cannot as a general rule bring their wives and children into the metropolitan areas where the vast majority of the employment possibilities are located. This produces terrible social disruption for families.

Some who claim to know Vorster insist he is realistic about the new pressures facing the country: new black awareness at home, new black, hostile governments in Mozambique and Angola and perhaps eventually in Rhodesia and Namibia (Southwest Africa), heightened concern even among some Afrikaners about the isolation of the Republic of South Africa from the international community, and a fresh challenge from the new white coalition party formed in 1975 by the Progressives and a breakaway segment of the United Party. Yet, unless Mr. Vorster begins to alter the basic repressive conditions under which blacks must live, it is difficult to claim he intends to create a multiracial society. Even the few small moves he has made so far have caused murmurings within the Nationalist Party (though so far no serious challenge has been mounted against him). This creates doubts about his ability to survive politically were he to push for a more equitable policy for blacks. Black and white South Africans live in two completely different worlds. And the majority of the Afrikaners who hold a tight reign on political power in the country see the world through the same glasses as the former American traveling with me on the plane. South Africa remains pre-Emancipation America revisited. It is a land where I was truly ashamed to be a white man.

One aspect of recent South African policy that will pose a problem for the U.S. Government, for the
United Nations, for the Organization of African Unity, and even for the Vatican in the near future is the homelands policy. In 1976 one of the nine homelands, the Transkei, occupying some 14,000 square miles of rugged enclave on the Indian Ocean, is slated for "full independence." This event will force our country, the U.N., and the Vatican to make a decision about whether or not to grant political recognition to the Transkei as a sovereign nation. The decision will not be an easy one, for it will inevitably involve a judgment on the basic justice of the homelands policy. The Transkei will assume all the trappings of an independent nation: flag, army, diplomatic corps. A new capital is being built at Umtata, an industrial park at Butterworth, and an anchorage at formerly white Port St. Johns, which was a recent grudging concession by the Pretoria government. Yet in the realm of economics and foreign policy the Transkei will be totally subservient to the Republic. Nowhere on the horizon is there even a glimmer of economic viability for this enclave. Some four million people will be considered "citizens" of this new nation. But in fact half of them will continue to live in the black metropolitan townships and many will have never laid eyes on the Transkei.

Much is at stake in the issue of the political recognition of Transkei independence. This homeland is the prize exhibit of the policy of "separate development," the official euphemism for apartheid. It is the only one of the homelands whose territories are all contiguous rather than patches here and there, and it is the first to apply for independence. If the Transkei gains some degree of international acceptance, and at least the look of real independence, the other homeland leaders, such as Chief Executive Gatsha Buthelezi of KwaZulu, may be persuaded to follow suit. If this happens, Pretoria would be well on the way to excising large clusters of blacks from its sovereign territory. Success of the homelands policy would mean that black South Africa, representing 80 per cent of the population of the RSA, would be reassigned to a mere 13 per cent of the land, and in most cases the least desirable areas at that. In addition, outside the Transkei the homelands as presently constituted are unconnected snatches of territory separated by prosperous white towns and villages. To show the ludicrous nature of the present homelands setup one Servite missionary in KwaZulu told me he has calculated that if his homeland became independent he would have to cross some fourteen border posts in the space of a few hours' drive to Durban. This is the cruel hoax being perpetrated in the name of "separate development." Not only would the homelands policy remove blacks from the Republic, but through multiple excisions the various tribes would be divided and segregated from each other, thereby undercutting their collective power. Divide and rule will have worked.

In one way Mr. Vorster is a realist. He recognizes very well that the apartheid situation cannot remain exactly as is. He is aware of how utterly dependent the South African economy is on black labor. If the black labor force of South Africa were to stage a general work stoppage, the country's economy would grind to a halt overnight. So the "separate development" policy was devised to solve the citizenship and labor problems at the same time. Blacks could now have citizenship in their own homeland, but with virtually no industry in those areas they would still be forced to work in the large cities. Studies demonstrate that the homelands could not support even 10 per cent of the millions of urban blacks. Thus the Republic would have its needed labor force while the citizenship problem would be solved because all the blacks would now be considered migrant workers from foreign countries, who obviously have no claim on political representation or property rights in the RSA, no more than the foreign workers in the various countries of Western Europe. The sacrifice on the part of white South Africa would be nothing more than 13 per cent of its vast territory. Quite a buy if it should manage to succeed.

Blacks in South Africa are powerless to do much about the homelands plan. Pretoria knows that the success of the policy hinges on acceptance by the outside world. Thousands of dollars are being poured into advertisements in leading American newspapers and magazines proclaiming the merits of separate development. Yet, the people of the Transkei were never asked to vote on the independence issue. Their "independence" will in fact deprive them of their birthright and an equitable share in the wealth and power of the South African nation—a nation in large part created and sustained by the toil of blacks.

Another cruel feature of the homelands policy pointed up by black intellectuals is the tribal divisions it is forging. Separate offices for each tribe are now being established in the urban townships such as Soweto outside of Johannesburg. These intellectuals claim that intertribal rivalry has been the curse of development and progress throughout newly independent Africa. It is the last thing black South Africa needs. For this reason the Black Renaissance Convention, the first national meeting of South African blacks, held at the black Catholic seminary in Hammanskraal near Pretoria in December, 1974, called for a "totally united and democratic South Africa."

In the light of the reality behind "separate development" I would depart from my usual posture with
regard to recognition of foreign governments. Normally I argue that political recognition should not involve moral evaluation of a nation's rulers and policies. It is better to have contact no matter how morally repulsive a regime's policies might be. Certainly there are many governments of questionable authenticity in the world today that we do formally recognize. In the United Nations the representatives of the two Soviet republics are no doubt less independent of the USSR than the Transkei delegation would be of Pretoria. But given the fact that the success or failure of "separate development" is so closely tied to its approbation by outside governments and international bodies, I believe the United States should refuse to recognize the Transkei and vote against its admission to the United Nations, encouraging other nations to follow suit.

Such a policy, while advocated primarily in the name of justice, would in the long run serve America's best interests. Many in our government argue that we must support the present Pretoria regime, no matter how unjust its racial policies, because the whole Cape of Good Hope region is vital to our self-interest. But we are making the same mistake here we made in South Vietnam and elsewhere. Eventually the blacks of South Africa will gain control. Twenty million people cannot forever be subjugated by a mere four million, no matter how good their armed forces and secret police might be. Nonsupport of Transkei independence would seriously, perhaps fatally, undercut the homelands policy and force the beginning of a real solution to the problem. Even some Afrikaners are aware that "separate development" is their last chance to avoid black majority rule. We would thereby gain some measure of respect with black South Africa, leaving open the possibility of continuing United States influence and presence in this crucial area of the world. Our current policy of support for the Pretoria regime is merely moving the Republic toward violent confrontation and intensifying the already deep hatred of our nation among those who one day will certainly govern. Our policy virtually assures the movement of any new black regime toward the Communist bloc.

One issue that has been debated with great vigor in the United States, particularly within the corporate responsibility movement with which I have been connected, is American investment in the RSA. A split has developed within the corporate responsibility movement, some urging American corporations to withdraw totally, while others counselpressing American corporations to take the lead in improving the pay scales for black workers. Obviously you cannot do both simultaneously. I discussed this dilemma with several black leaders. Their responses were complex. They pointed out that the Black Renaissance Convention mentioned above clearly urged all countries of the world "to withdraw all cultural, educational, economic, manpower, and military support to the existing racist Government and all its racist institutions." To their mind this clearly represented the ideal response. But they were also pragmatic enough to recognize that investment would likely continue and that there was a need to push for better wages for blacks. This answer hardly solved my problem.

In fact the answer to the investments dilemma will depend a great deal on one's perception of how revolutionary change occurs. The more radical elements claim that the greater hardships blacks would suffer in the short run by the withdrawal of foreign investments would make them more prone to revolt; it would "conscientize" them, while their revolutionary fervor might be bought off by better wages. Another school of thought points to studies such as that of the late historian Crane Brinton. In his classic The Anatomy of Revolution Brinton argued that poor and destitute societies do not make successful revolutions. Only societies in which there is rising economic status, which in turn produces dissatisfaction and frustration in the face of the impossibility of upward mobility, have undertaken successful revolutions. Following this line of reasoning, investments should continue, and the goal of the corporate responsibility movement should be to pressure American firms there to pay equal wages for equal work. Economic progress among blacks will provide the most potent force for substantial social change in the Republic.

Good cases can be made for both of the above approaches to the question. Certainly increased investment provides the Pretoria government with the wherewithal to strengthen its military and develop increasingly sophisticated means of repression. Despite this, I lean toward the "better wage" approach rather than outright divestment. It is the more realistic and potentially successful road toward meaningful change in the RSA.

The question one is inevitably asked after visiting South Africa is whether there still remains the possibility of nonviolent change. One would hope this could be the case. Certainly the whites in South Africa have a solid claim to residence in Southern Africa. Many have roots there that go much farther back than do ours in North America. They have built the most industrialized economy on the whole continent, which could prove of real benefit to the whole of Southern Africa. Violence might well bring the type of economic destruction now taking place in Angola. Some white liberals feel there is still a possibility of change with no, or only minimal, violence. They see in Prime Minister Vorster the qualities required to bring about such change if the homelands policy collapses. He has impeccable Afrikaner credentials in the party, state, and in the Dutch Reformed Church. He is also shrewd, pragmatic, and has a strong instinct for survival. But to an outside observer there seems little in his policies so far to justify the hope. Such a trek by Vorster would seem to require a miracle. The striking fact to me was the failure to locate a single educated black who felt nonviolent change to a multiracial society of majority rule had a prayer of a chance. As one black accountant in Pretoria said to me bluntly: "What privileged class has ever relinquished power voluntarily?" White South Africa is as privileged as any society on today's earth.