

Carter on Apartheid

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In 1913, when Woodrow Wilson was assuming the duties of President of the United States, Joseph Stalin was in exile in Siberia and Lenin in Galicia. When Union and Confederate veterans were meeting to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg and Henry Ford was about to set up the first modern assembly line, the newly established Union of South Africa promulgated the Natives Land Act. A world preoccupied with the decay of great empires and apprehensive about the onset of world conflict was only dimly aware of this law enacted in a distant corner of a remote continent. The law prescribed the apportionment of territory of the Union into areas of exclusive settlement by whites and blacks. No blacks could be landholders in areas designated for white settlement and no whites could own land in the 23 million acres reserved for blacks. When communism was an ideology without a homeland, when fascism was only beginning to be postulated, and when the modern welfare state was the dream of a few visionaries, the design of *apartheid* had already begun to take shape.

It is more than a chronological curiosity to observe that apartheid is one of the world's senior ideologies and that in statutory form it antedated some doctrines that are recognized as durable international fixtures. Like all mature ideologies, apartheid has been modified, adapted, recast, and subjected to revisionism, apostasy, and schism. It has also assumed a number of different guises—both refined and degenerate. Although the original vision of a territorial separation of white and black is perhaps the most venerable element in apartheid philosophy, little was done until fairly recently to advance the concept to the point of implementation. What came to define apartheid, especially in the minds of outsiders, was *baasskap*—the crude old garden variety of white supremacy. Its concrete expression was what has come to be known as “petty apartheid.” It is the well-recognized system of total social control of the black population in and around the white cities of South Africa

and the denial to the blacks of even the most primitive forms of political organization within the white territory. Its external forms bore a striking resemblance to our own system of Jim Crow, but behind the “whites only” park benches and segregated toilets there lurked a logic far different from the segregation we had come to know in the United States.

American racial segregation, for all its viciousness, was essentially an informal and slapdash system. There cannot even be said to be a coherent body of racist doctrine except for some fin de siècle anthropological atrocities and the contributions of the more unhinged social Darwinists; certainly there was no unified body of doctrine or comprehensive philosophy or etiology. It was an *ad hoc* patchwork of state laws, judicial opinions, customs, practices, and taboos. Curiously, the only formalized schemes for dealing with American racial diversity territorially came not from the segregationists themselves but from black nationalists and white radicals—such as the plan put forth by the American Communists at Stalin's behest for a “Black Belt Nation.” The American exponents of segregation were content to go along with the ancient covenant of 1877, which allowed the South to order its own race relations.

More important, perhaps, than the failure of the segregationists to set forth any clear idea of the consummation of their racism was the simple fact of the Constitution. It had, after all, conferred citizenship on American blacks. Although the ringing phrases of the Constitution may have provided scant comfort to American blacks during the segregation era, those phrases did provide a focus for moral and legal appeal and demonstrated the contradictions between democratic ideology and the reality of oppression. Most important, however, the noble professions of the American system made this country uniquely vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy and provided the moral impetus for the civil rights movement. Moreover, as V.O. Key pointed out at the time of the most intense civil rights activity, the attitudes of Southern whites were never so unified or consistently hostile to blacks as many had assumed.

The remarkable success of the civil rights movement

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may well have been a uniquely American phenomenon—not only because of its moral unassailability, but because of the lack of solidarity among its opponents and their lack of any unifying vision aside from the hope that segregation would somehow last forever.

Americans who participated in the civil rights movement, like U.N. Representative Andrew Young, and those who witnessed it and sympathized with it, like President Carter, now observe that the transition from segregation in the South has gone more smoothly than originally predicted and has been more thorough because of the “understandings” that existed between white and black Southerners. It is natural, then, for people like Carter and Young to draw analogies, at least subconsciously, between racial dynamics here and elsewhere. There is an inclination to think that perhaps the citadel of apartheid in South Africa could be as effectively reduced as the walls of segregation in America, and with much the same weaponry.

President Carter has decreed that in foreign policy our measures will mirror our morality and our actions will comport with our professions. Carter’s celebrated letter to Andrei Sakharov and his vow to speak out on behalf of human rights in the Soviet Union are evidences of his disposition to be outspoken on the questions of freedom and oppression. Questions have already been raised about the compatibility of routine diplomacy with a posture of moral censure and approbation. The *New York Times* conferred its blessings on Carter’s stern moral lectures to dictators in an editorial on February 22, but abjured the President to “make it plain that he will continue to distinguish between American sympathies and American actions.”

In our relationships with vast continental tyrannies, which are armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons, the *New York Times’* warning may be superfluous. It is unlikely that Carter will lead a cavalry charge into the Ukraine on behalf of Valentin Moroz or have Paul Warnke stalk out of the SALT negotiations to protest the treatment of Vladimir Bukovsky. The counterproductive results of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment and other efforts to use economic leverage on the Soviet Union suggest that internal reform cannot be effected easily by external pressure on large, self-confident, and tightly controlled states.

In the case of South African apartheid, however, there are pressures for Carter to go well beyond chiding and admonition and escalate the challenge to the point of using economic and diplomatic weapons to force a change in policy on the Pretoria Government. American foes of apartheid, who watched with horror while Nixon and Kissinger cozied up to South Africa, made feeble gestures to block the Byrd Amendment, and trod softly on the Portuguese colonial question, see in Carter the avenging angel of racial justice. They know Carter’s instincts to be sound on racial matters, and there is a widely held expectation that Carter will do something forceful and tangible to discredit or incapacitate apartheid.

Some foes of apartheid accept it as a matter of faith that Carter will make tough and dramatic new moves.

Among them is South Africa’s longtime Congressional nemesis, Representative Charles Diggs (D-Mich.), who said in Johannesburg shortly after Carter’s inauguration that “Surely [the South African Government has] enough intelligence information to realize that we are talking about a new policy in the United States.” Diggs did not elaborate on what this new, and presumably tougher, policy would be, but even some highly placed South Africans share this assumption. South Africa’s Ambassador to the United States and Foreign Minister-designate, R.F. (Pik) Botha, was reported to have “expressed his dismay” about the prospect of Carter’s election, and Ken Owen, Washington correspondent of the *Argus* group, has painted an alarming picture for his South African readers of what he calls “the anti-South Africa squad” surrounding Jimmy Carter. This circle, composed of Young, Diggs, and Senator Dick Clark (D-Iowa), Chairman of the Subcommittee on African Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is alleged to be pushing Carter to pursue a combative policy toward South Africa.

So advanced is the thinking about a dramatic policy change that one member of Congress commissioned a study by the Congressional Reference Service, which came up with an arsenal of twenty-two economic and diplomatic weapons for Carter to use “to induce peaceful change in South Africa.” Spanning the spectrum from the termination of the office of U.S. military attaché in Pretoria to prohibiting U.S. banks from financing projects in South Africa, it stops just short of having Jimmy Carter punch Prime Minister John Vorster in the nose.

There is now substantial evidence for thinking that Carter will indeed be more capacious than his predecessors in regard to South Africa’s racial policies. Although there is considerable debate over the extent to which the American black community is concerned about apartheid, black leaders most certainly do look to Carter to apply pressure. Given the remarkable outpouring of black electoral support for Carter and the natural tendency for Presidents to want to make their mark in foreign affairs, some bold steps are understandable. In an interview with the *Financial Mail*, a South African newspaper, Carter promised to use “economic leverage against what is, after all, a government system of repression in South Africa....” Given Carter’s instincts, experience, support, and his high regard for people like Andrew Young, who are counseling a more combative policy toward South Africa, it seems likely Carter will continue to express himself quite vocally on apartheid. One should not be surprised by proposals to unleash an array of diplomatic and economic weapons to induce racial change in South Africa, nor by Carter’s giving vent to moral outrage against racial oppression by recalling his own confrontation with Southern segregation. All this is consonant with Carter’s campaign to make America “a beacon for nations who search for peace, and who search for freedom, who search for individual liberty, who search for basic human rights....”

As plausible as this course of action might seem, it

does not take into account some serious obstacles in the translation of private morality into public policy and the projection of domestic values onto the international stage.

First of all, there has always been a tendency among American liberals to underestimate the degree of domestic support South Africa enjoys in this country. Within the business community, in particular, South Africa is seen as providing an estimable climate for private investment. Since the Soweto uprisings South Africa has been assigned to the "risk category" by some investors, but short-term money continues to flow in. The fact that American business does not rise resolutely to defend South Africa every time it comes under attack does not mean that corporations would stand meekly aside while restrictive and punitive legislation was enacted to discourage American investment there. There are many influential groups and individuals in the military and intelligence communities who see South Africa's position athwart the busiest tanker lanes in the world as an irrefutable argument for friendship with South Africa. It is non-Communist and free enterprise in a world of growing collectivism. One should never underestimate the value of those credentials to solid, doctrinaire, American capitalists. They will not take a major disinvestment offensive lying down, despite the fact that some liberal executives might be inclined to support it.

Next, there appears to be a very substantial division of opinion within Carter's foreign policy team on Southern Africa questions. This seems to be no minor quibble over tactics but rather a major divergence on assumptions. It was reported in February that in a briefing for Congressmen, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski declared that separate development was the only solution for the racial problems of South Africa. Andrew Young reportedly shot back, "No way!"

The most celebrated squabble among Carter advisors on Africa took place when Young declared in an interview on CBS' "60 Minutes" that Cuban troops in Angola exerted "a stabilizing influence." Secretary of State Cyrus Vance lost little time in setting the record straight that Young's statements did not reflect administration policy. Young also believes that American pressure on South Africa can produce a quick settlement of the Rhodesian impasse, since the withdrawal of South African support for Ian Smith would produce an immediate collapse of his government. When asked about Young's characterization at a news conference on January 31, 1977, Vance replied: "I don't think it's really quite that simple."

What seems to have emerged on the Southern Africa question is a firm division of opinion between the "activists" and the "diplomats," principally between Young and the U.N. delegation on one side and Vance and Brzezinski on the other. More cautious recommendations on Southern Africa are likely to emerge from State and the National Security Council, and Young may find himself articulating a policy far more restrained than he would like. Vance agrees with Young to the extent that both see South Africa as the key to a Rhodesian settlement, but they diverge on the question of how to enlist its assistance. Vance and Brzezinski, moreover,

probably have vastly different notions from those of Young about the extent to which South Africa's racial policies can be influenced by this country.

This underscores the third, and perhaps the most serious, obstacle to the foreign policy of this country as an instrument of inducing change in South Africa: The extent to which South Africa is prepared to yield on the question of separate development. South Africa has not been oblivious in the past to international displeasure with its racial policies, nor has it been adamantly inflexible in the face of internal protest. The concessions, however, have been of a decidedly cosmetic nature and have never approached the point of backing off on separate development. On that policy John Vorster has been obdurate. When asked in an interview on an American public affairs program late in 1976 if he could envision black majority rule for South Africa sometime in the future, Vorster replied: "Yes, certainly. Black majority rule for the Xhosas in the Transkei, for the Zulus in Zululand, for the Vendas in Vandaland, and for the Tswanas in their land, but certainly not in the white portion of South Africa."

It is difficult to imagine the combination of external pressures that could be brought to bear on South Africa to budge Vorster or any likely successor on this policy that has been sixty-four years in the making. No conceivable array of American rebukes and sanctions would have the combined power to force a retreat from what has come to be a cardinal tenet of South African politics.

While it is true that the United States has never really tried to turn the screws on South Africa, enough scorn and contempt have been heaped on South Africa over the years to make the government in Pretoria thick-skinned. We may also misconstrue the nature of elite disenchantment with the Government's racial policies.

Vertigtheid, a term that has been bandied about for several years as a designation for those Afrikaners who favor liberalized racial policies, is not a rubric that typically embraces supporters of a unitary, multiracial, one-man-one-vote system. Although some *vertligtes* may hope for such a solution, the vast majority of South African whites—both English and Afrikaners—are solidly behind Prime Minister Vorster's program of separate development. Politically, the most significant opposition to the program occurs not on the left but on the right, where Dr. Albert Herzog and his Herstigte Nasionale Party regard Vorster as dangerously liberal on racial matters.

Vorster has transmogrified the image of apartheid and has succeeded in convincing many liberals that separate development is the only possible course for South Africa. There is a willingness—indeed a sense of urgency—about dismantling the corrupt form of apartheid, the humiliating Jim Crow aspects, and a strong impulse to get on with its perfected form, separate development. A great deal of planning and preparation went into the launching, last October, of the flagship of separate development, the homeland of Transkei. Vorster has too much riding on its success and recognition to write it off as a slipshod quisling mini-state.

Vorster and the preponderant section of the white community see separate development not as the preferred way for South Africa to maintain itself but simply as the only way. Separate development, for Vorster, is just not a negotiable question. External pressure, if anything, has hastened its consummation. It is regarded as the unique South African solution, and the chances of its being abandoned as the result of stern moral lectures from outside or even any likely barrage of snubs and sanctions is about as probable as Bulgaria's abandonment of communism. It is not a quickie solution whipped up to suit the taste of world public opinion; it is the signal precept of the South African political system.

Unlike American segregation, it is a unified doctrine—preached by politicians, intoned by theologians, and justified by academicians. It is entirely harmonious with South African constitutionalism, compatible with its political traditions, and part of the Afrikaner cosmology. It has withstood the moral fusillades of three decades. Reduced to its essentials, it is a principle that holds that the Christian and Western values as they are practiced by white South Africans would be eradicated in a unitary multiracial state. Core values tend not to be mediums of negotiation except under extreme duress.

This is the supreme reality to be faced by those who wish to formulate a policy aimed at reversing South Africa's racial policies. The President of the United States can and should arraign South Africa morally. He may see in the rigid and increasingly institutionalized separation of the races an affront to human dignity akin to our own segregationist past and hope that his indignation will cause the South African Government to alter its course. But the disposition to draw parallels between American segregation and apartheid is another obstacle to formulating a realistic policy toward South Africa. The "understandings" between white and black Southerners have no parallel in the relations between Afrikaners and black South Africans, nor is the role of white liberals in both societies completely analogous. Representative Andrew Young's criticism of the "paternal liberalism" of South African opposition leader Helen Suzman and his suggestion that it is preferable to deal with the most oppressive whites seems suspiciously like an analogy to the American situation.

Carter will soon find that only through the use of radical measures—measures he may be unwilling or unable to adopt—will the consummation of the design for separate development be halted. Conceding that the master plan of apartheid cannot be reversed by external protest does not invalidate the moral necessity of that protest, nor does it make the gestures futile and trivial. If South Africa craves anything it is the approbation of the United States, and its eagerness to recommend itself to Carter provides him with some unusual opportunities.

Carter can achieve dramatic success by calling attention to the plight of South African dissidents. Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe are every bit as worthy to be singled out for Carter's protection-by-recognition as Andrei Sakharov and Aleksandr Ginsburg. There are the

Soweto detainees and innumerable black political prisoners being held under a variety of repressive statutes who can only benefit from having their hardships illuminated. This might well call a halt to the epidemic of "suicides" by political prisoners undergoing interrogation.

He can invite to the White House representatives of South African exile groups in the United States.

He can dispatch Vice President Mondale on a fact-finding mission to South Africa with instructions to request meetings with specific black leaders and not simply those trotted out by the Government, but he should also allow the Government to make its case.

He can convene a White House conference of executives of American firms doing business in South Africa to devise a set of principles to make their operations in that country conform, as nearly as possible, to our own fair employment standards.

These steps the President can take unilaterally. They require no action by Congress and tie him to no immediate position on the question of separate development—it is much too early for him to decide what steps to take on that matter. There is also nothing in these gestures that would jeopardize the constructive use of South Africa as a broker for a peaceful settlement of the Rhodesia crisis—a settlement that, if anything, is more in South Africa's interest than in ours. The most urgent of these steps is that of relief for the political prisoners.

The economic cudgels to scourge apartheid may be denied to Carter. He cannot countenance military action. And he may discover that nothing short of these draconian measures can arrest the fullest flowering of the gloomy logic of apartheid, which is expressed in the homelands policy. But if his moral witness can bring home one prisoner from Robben Island, free one detainee from house arrest, halt one brutal interrogation, forestall one indictment under the Terrorism Act, or liberate one Soweto student, it will meet both the tests of pragmatism and principle. It matters little whether this is done by negotiation or expostulation. The fact remains that it has never been attempted in any serious way by an American President. And if South Africa is as concerned as it purports to be about securing the good will of Jimmy Carter, this may be leverage enough.

Should Carter decide to undertake the more radical and complicated long-term course of using American policy to dissuade South Africa from completion of the grand design of separate development, he should be under no illusions as to what that task will entail. For all the support he may call upon from black and liberal groups, he must expect unrelenting opposition from others. Even if he can surmount this opposition, there is the more agonizing problem of the alternatives to separate development for a society that has countenanced no alternatives. The effect of using leverage and pressure on South Africa to induce change when the nature and direction of that change is so dimly perceived may be to bring about instability and violence rather than reform. Should that occur, the foreign policy of this country would not meet the test of morality even by the most flexible definition.