

## Exchanging Messages With South Africa

BY ROSS K. BAKER

An abiding criticism of the Reagan administration in the first six months of its life was that it had no foreign policy. In a global sense this criticism was certainly well taken. Nothing resembling Kissinger's détente policy or Carter's human rights doctrine seemed even in the works. Yet without the essential dimensions of a universal foreign policy, regional policies were taking shape.

Shortly after Reagan's election and well before his inauguration, those who saw themselves as both the authors and legatees of the Reagan landslide made a move to dismantle the Carter African policy and to ensure that its like would not soon emerge. Reagan's conservative allies in Congress—most notably Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina—put the new administration on notice that henceforth South Africa would be dropped from this country's enemies list and that the United States no longer would be counted in the ranks of Pretoria's antagonists at the United Nations.

Evidence abounded that changes were in the wind. There was an early official meeting with South Africa's foreign minister, "Pik" Botha, and Reagan pronounced favorably on South Africa's strategic value in the course of a news conference, at which he also dismissed speculation that an American rapprochement with South Africa might cause the Nigerians—our second largest supplier of foreign oil—to turn off the tap.

Why were American conservatives so exercised over South Africa and bent upon scrapping the policies of the previous administration toward an area of the world that, after all, has never glowed very bright in the foreign policy firmament? The answer is that they look upon South Africa in much the same way as do their liberal antagonists—more as symbol than as state. And it invites analogies—false ones by and large—to the United States.

Somehow Jimmy Carter, a latecomer to the civil rights struggle, could never shake himself of the conviction that apartheid was nothing more than old-style, downhome Jim Crow in a more exotic setting. This misconception was shared by others in his administra-

tion. What brought down the bastion of racism in Jackson, they seemed to reason, would reduce the fortress of segregation in Johannesburg. The fact that American white supremacy was never more than a jerry-built structure designed to keep a tenth of the population in its place and that apartheid is a complex system designed to control 80 per cent of South Africa's population did not blunt the tendency to draw parallels.

Jesse Helms and his followers are no less bemused by the superficial similarities. Not to put too fine a point on it, many on the Right are still unreconciled to the legal gains made by American blacks since the 1950s. They see in the National Party regime that has dominated South African politics since 1948 an organization that not only put blacks in their place but has kept them there. Their tendency is to look upon independent black Africa as an undifferentiated mass of collectivist states that for twenty years has marched in serried ranks to Moscow's (or Peking's) tune. In their eyes the only African leaders who have risen to the stature of statesmen have been Moise Tshombe of the old secessionist state of Katanga, Rhodesia's Bishop Abel T. Muzorewa, and, most currently, Jonas Savimbi, whose UNITA forces control much of southern Angola and tie down fifteen thousand Cuban troops.

The grotesqueries of the Left are no less appalling when it comes to Africa in general and Southern Africa in particular. Certainly the statement by the then U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young that Cuban troops in Angola constituted a stabilizing influence won the American Pangloss Award hands down. His companion piece came in the form of an observation that the Government of South Africa was "illegitimate," which prompted people to respond, "Compared to what? Idi Amin's Uganda? Bokassa I's Central African Empire? Macías's Equatorial Guinea?" It may be proper to label foreign governments as odious or stupid, but one makes determinations of legitimacy at one's peril.

### THE FUTURE

With so much half-cocked commentary on Southern Africa from both Right and Left, it is refreshing to discover two books that, while quite dissimilar, approach the topic of South Africa's future with something approximating balanced judgment. I hasten to add that these works are not impartial; I doubt there can be true impartiality, given the monstrous racial policies of the South African Government. The evenhanded-

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ness of these books consists in their not consigning white South Africans to the scrap heap of history for their past mistakes and their acknowledgement that change will not occur overnight.

The more modest of the two works, *South Africa: Coming of Age Under Apartheid* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 180 pp., \$13.95), consists of essays on the lives of eight South African teenagers who represent the major racial and linguistic communities of the country. It is a book of great good will directed at the younger American reader. A high school library faced with the task of choosing one book on contemporary South African life could do far worse than elect this one. It gives a nice capsule history of South Africa in Chapter 2, but its real appeal comes from Jason and Ettagale Laure's glimpses into the lives of these eight very engaging youngsters, who range from a young black man in Soweto to a young white South African Army recruit in Namibia. You read about them and hope to God they are not consumed in a future cataclysm that outsiders are all too ready to predict for South Africa.

Vastly more ambitious and relentlessly centered on policy questions is the report of the Rockefeller Foundation's Study Commission on U.S. Policy Toward Southern Africa entitled *South Africa: Time Running Out* (University of California Press, 517 pp., \$8.95 [paper]). With the brainpower of ten commissioners, fourteen staff members, seventy-five consultants, and three advisors, the Rockefeller group has produced an exhaustive, meticulous, and well-reasoned study. Unlike other commission studies, which typically call on the services of scores of worthies and turn out voluminous but insipid reports, *South Africa* is direct and hard-hitting. What adds to its force is a feature it shares with the vastly different volume by the Laures. It provides the testimony of real, live South Africans.

The most audacious feature of the Rockefeller study is a set of policy recommendations ranging from what U.S. policy ought to be on nuclear cooperation with South Africa to the thorny problems of embargoes and disinvestment. The study comes down solidly against any military cooperation with South Africa and tends to minimize the strategic location of the country on the flank of the tanker routes from the Persian Gulf. The soundness of the reasoning here is most impressive. The study sees little danger to Western oil supplies from a hostile government at the tip of the Cape of Good Hope and argues persuasively that the Soviets—with airfields in Kandahar, Afghanistan, an hour's flying time from the Straits of Hormuz—are now in a position to choke off Western oil at its most vulnerable point. It would make little sense for the Soviets to attempt the same interdiction under far less advantageous circumstances, expending time and energy on subverting the Government of South Africa. In either case the response of the West to a threat to its oil flow would be to treat it as a *casus belli*. A scenario that has the Soviets backing into world war is a trifle farfetched, and the study quite properly debunks this imaginary horror.

The Rockefeller report is justly equivocal on the matter of sanctions, embargoes, and disinvestment. It acknowledges the sorry record of such efforts at apply-

ing economic pressure and comes around to the conclusion that such stern measures would probably end up hurting the black population of South Africa as much as it would the government. At the same time, it recognizes the fact that the South African Government has shown itself sensitive to international disapproval. Its conclusions on the embargo and sanctions questions turn on very pragmatic reasoning. They won't work.

## INVESTMENT STRATEGY

The disinvestment question is even trickier. Americans, frustrated by their inability to budge the rock of apartheid, have resorted to applying pressure on the few U.S. corporations with significant operations or assets in South Africa. A familiar ritual over the past ten years has been demonstrations at university commencements demanding that trustees sell shares in any firm having the slightest hint of a South African connection. The Rockefeller commissioners do not urge such a course or counsel against it. They do point out that divesting an institution's portfolio of offending stocks removes any leverage it might have with a corporation involved in South Africa.

The overall investment strategy vis-à-vis South Africa put forward by the Rockefeller group bears an uncanny resemblance to the publicly proclaimed views of Henry Ford II after his visit to South Africa several years ago. The thrust of this view is that American corporations may have the power to act as a sort of Trojan Horse inside the citadel of apartheid. This involves the adoption by South African affiliates of American corporations of the so-called "Sullivan Principles." These guidelines for conducting American-style affirmative action under apartheid (developed by Philadelphia minister and black capitalism enthusiast Leon Sullivan) have been attacked by disinvestment groups as having limited effect on overall racial policies. The fact that the South African Government has often chosen to look the other way while U.S. companies implement the Sullivan Principles may also condemn it in the eyes of the divestiture groups. While the Rockefeller group's endorsement of the Principles is not wildly enthusiastic, it is clear that they regard it as useful if pursued with vigor and consistency. The fact that the changes wrought by companies adhering to these principles are not as dramatic as some would like and that the South African Government does not oppose them actively should not be interpreted as evidence that they are without value. No dramatic change in South Africa is likely to occur in the short run, nor is there reason to believe that the wholesale withdrawal of American companies will result in a deathblow to apartheid.

If there is an overall theme to the policy recommendations at the conclusion of the Rockefeller study it is that no combination of American actions will have much effect on the Government of South Africa. We are really in the business of sending messages. The messages sent by the Carter administration were sometimes tactless and maladroit, but somehow one could not escape from the feeling that they did amount to a general indictment of apartheid. It is unlikely that the kinds of messages favored by the Rockefeller study will be forthcoming under the present administration. ❧