UNDER COVER

The New Activism

In American colleges and universities this year, demonstrations against apartheid and demands for divestment were signs of a political spring. The late '70s and early '80s were hibernal for politics among young Americans. Events helped dampen interest, but the mood of students—privatistic rather than conservative—had deeper roots. These were and are the children of parents who grew up in the '50s, the age of McCarthy and the lonely crowd. The bitter political grapes of that time still set the children's teeth on edge in critical respects; American colleges have been revisited by the Silent Generation.

The Silent Generation, however, was itself less placid than it seemed: At the time, Paul de Bruhl warned Americans that "no one is as silent as when he is about to throw up." So it proved, and so it may again. American students are beginning to be the offspring of the generation of the '60s. College freshmen this year were born about 1966, and it seems a fair guess that most of their parents entered college between 1952 and 1959, the oldest graduating as the '50s came to an end, the youngest in the early years of the next decade. The nostalgia for the '60s that many of us have noticed among our students may, in other words, be only the crocus of the next hundred flowers. It is a beginning in another sense: Political interest and commitment is matriculation in the school of political life, and today's students have a chance to learn lessons which their parents only imperfectly conned.

Apartheid is an obvious target for renewed political sensibility because, like the Southern Civil Rights movement of the early '60s, it is *morally* unambiguous. The national administration points to practical complications and college trustees are inclined to follow suit, but they do not defend the South African regime. The active defenders of evil—apartheid's partisans—are not part of our personal and social world. This affords young Americans a relatively safe sphere for political experiment: it allows students to challenge their political society without being cut off from it, a matter of some value in civic education. But for the same reasons, the attack on South Africa's racial policies is likely to restore the cliché of '60s rhetoric in which radicals pronounce on tepid liberals the biblical curse of Meroz. Debate at that level can be fervid; it will also be truncated.

That negative possibility is even more likely because in at least one respect the demand for divestment is *not* like the Civil Rights movement. That movement was above all else an *engagement*, an active combat with segregation and racism in society and in one's soul, involving an immersion in the imperfections and compromises of political art and action. On its face, divestment at least appears to suggest a separation from the struggle in South Africa out of concern to preserve our own purity.

Of course, divestment is intended as a blow against the South African economy, and so it would be. Yet, aside from the fact that such a blow would fall as heavily on black South Africans as on their oppressors, it is likely to prove less effective than many hope. Divestment on a large scale would certainly discourage American corporations from doing business with South Africa directly, but it would be all but impossible to prevent indirect commerce. American corporations would certainly deny that they can be held responsible if they lend, buy, or sell to foreign businesses which engage in commerce with South Africa. Like any similar embargo, divestment would raise South Africa's costs, which might be reason enough for doing it, but it would not put the South African regime or its economy out of business.

There is a better case for the *movement* for divestment, I think, in the argument that it helps to educate the American public, making it less possible for us to ignore apartheid and its horrors. As civic education, however, the movement for divestment is more important than divestment itself. If the movement for divestment seemed to fail, the consequences would be dreadful; on the other hand, success would be ruinous, since it would take South Africa off the evening news until some substitute could be found.

Part of the problem is that Americans, at the moment, have so few ways in which to oppose apartheid. It is not as feasible for students to go to Johannesburg or Pretoria as it was for them to go to Jackson or Birmingham, and South Africa has been able to keep almost all foreign protest at an arm's length. Yet that very restriction dictates part of the strategy for American opponents of apartheid: to construct, wherever possible, the means and channels for political engagement in South Africa. Some of these are obvious: support for South African groups opposing the regime, aid to exiles, and direct humanitarian aid to the oppressed. And imagination, once applied, will disclose others. There is an obvious case, for example, for subsidies to Americans willing to go to South Africa; as in the American South, the media find it harder to ignore white (and in South Africa, American) faces in the crowd. In any case, Americans need to do more than stand aside from South African political life.

Let me emphasize that I am not arguing that Americans should forswear divestment, a strong but rather ultimate weapon: Americans against apartheid need more weapons, not fewer.

In South Africa, the history of oppression and resentment makes an apocalyptic outcome all too likely. The fears of South African whites have a terrible probability which their desperation makes worse; the terror to which South African blacks are subjected is every day's news. In the South of the Civil Rights movement, the worst possibilities were ruled out by national public opinion and by the Federal government. The more isolated South African politics is, the more South Africans will be left to their own demons. Americans need ways of intervening with enough skill, enough force, and enough sensitivity to help South Africans explore, in their little time, their remaining chances for civility and a common life.

WILSON CAREY McWILLIAMS

Wilson Carey McWilliams, Professor of Political Science at Livingston College, Rutgers University, inaugurated the "Under Cover" column and tended it for several years.