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SOUTHERN AFRICA AND THE U.S.A.

A Study in Racism

By Franklin H. Williams

Editor's note—*The following insight into America's Southern Africa policy was first presented at the Second Merze Tate Annual Seminar in Diplomatic History at Howard University, November 8, 1978. The seminar was sponsored by the Department of History. Williams, a former U. S. ambassador to Ghana, is now president of the Phelps-Stokes Fund.*

A discussion focusing solely upon the southern tip of the African continent would be roughly equivalent to the tale of the seven blind men trying to describe an elephant. Each one was convinced that the beast looked like the area—the leg, the trunk, and so on—that he felt with his hands. Southern Africa is at least as complex as an elephant, and deserves a broader perspective.

The United States' dealings with Africa can best be understood in the context of one word: RACISM. It's an ugly word, denoting ignorance, unthinking bias and arrogance. All three of these meanings and more apply to the poor record of African/American policy.

Briefly stated, in shaping the official relations to African developments, historically, the U. S. followed the colonialists' lead in almost every single arena, taking directions from the French, the Belgians, the English, the Germans, and finally, as late as 1974, from the Portuguese. When one by one, the heat of revolution became too great to ignore in the colonies, America sided with the Europeans in every instance. It didn't even occur to America to share the aspirations of the Black majority. The Angolan explosion seemed to catch the Ford Administration by surprise, and for a while there, Henry Kissinger and company charged around like confused actors in a Grade B Western—unable to tell the bad guys from the good guys.

When the smoke cleared, Kissinger, who had once stated that "this isn't Africa's century," began his now-historic pilgrimage to the continent, and finally, in Lusaka, Zambia, enunciated the United States' "commitment to majority rule" in Africa.

The second hobbling effect of racially-influenced Africa policy has been most clearly seen in dealings with newly independent African nations. The U. S. has quite simply been unable to formulate guidelines and policies which make sense, because the U. S. has been largely preoccupied not with the legitimate, inevitable birth-pains of these nations, but with its own, entirely inappropriate assessments of "right" and "wrong." America is not really supporting or encouraging a newly independent Mozambique, for example (though it maintains a diplomatic presence there), because it finds that nation's socialism offensive. And the U. S. seems incapable of sober thought the minute a whiff of "the Red Menace" reaches its nostrils—particularly if it emanates from a Black country.

Another case in point, Angola, is still not officially recognized by the United States for similar reasons. America persists, in other words, in relating to these countries indirectly, not in terms of what they need or want or can offer, but in terms of their so-called involvement with communist nations.

When the U. S. is not blinded by paranoia, its policy-makers have too often either ignored or been ignorant of the staggering problems—some ancient, others new—of the struggling young African countries. Few Americans, for instance, understand the complexities of national borders. Arbitrarily drawn by the colonialists without regard to tribal groups (which they frequently separated), these borders must now be maintained as strenuously as President Lincoln defended the Union, if these countries are to flourish and survive. America did not understand this principle when the Biafran crisis occurred in Nigeria, although the U. S. made some progress toward comprehension in its reaction to the recent Ethiopian-Somalian confrontation. Careful, sensitive study would—to put it mildly—keep America out of a lot of trouble.

The U. S. mass media, the public's link with day-by-day international information, has compounded ignorance and confusion through omission and commission. Unless the African news of the day contains a mountain of Black bodies (or one white one, as occurred during the Ugandan-Israeli skirmish), the folks in Nashville and Boise and Hartford will probably not hear about it. Even highly educated, concerned Americans are generally hard-pressed to tell you the most basic facts about the African continent, known in the media quite frequently as "a country." This "country," just to refresh your memory, has 51 independent, autonomous, sovereign states within its vast landmass—a mass so large that one could put the United States, Europe, Britain, Japan, and India within its borders and still have room to spare. Interestingly, most Americans are amazed to learn that Egypt is an African nation—probably because with the exception of those strange Southern African countries everybody is making such a lot of noise about, African nations are supposed to be Black, aren't they?

And so, by way of racism, misinformation, insensitivity, and media black out, the United States comes to that fantastic three-piece puzzle known as Southern Africa. Here, as elsewhere on that vast continent, creative policy must rest upon accurate assessments of local conditions and personalities, assessments which are scrupulously objective. When the home-

work has been completed and digested, a simplistic but nevertheless valid rule of thumb when shaping foreign policy is to maintain a balance between one's own national best interest and the best interest of the other country.

It hasn't worked out that way in the most pivotal area of the southern crescent, South Africa herself. There, the U. S. policy has traditionally ignored the harsh inner realities of life under apartheid, adhering closely to its own domestic concerns. Economically, those concerns are considerable—some \$1.5 billion at last count—and the reason for such a substantial investment over the past 25 years could not be simpler: Tremendous profitability, due to cheap Black labor. The returns for American investors have consistently ranged from 15 to 20% on South African investments, although they have dropped in the past few years because of the recession.

"The 13% of the land set aside for the 87% of the population which is Black, contains no gold or diamond mines, no industrial or urban areas."

In the face of rising pressure around the world to change its racial policies, South Africa has mounted a sophisticated, multi-million dollar public relations and lobbying campaign which further confuses the American public and its policy-makers. Its main theme is that the 25 million people who live in the territory known as South Africa do not constitute a nation, but rather a number of national units, each with its own culture, language, and "homeland." It is a persuasive argument on first glance. On closer scrutiny, however, it doesn't take an international expert to discover that 5 million Zulus and 5 million Xhosas have a common culture with such similar languages that a linguist can more quickly identify the difference between Texans and Nebraskans.

Further, nobody knows for sure whether or not the Black population wants such a "solution," because in the 300-year history of the Afrikaans rule, there has never been a poll or a referendum to find out, and of course, Black people in South Africa have never been allowed to vote. The likelihood of an affirmative response seems remote when one considers the terms: The 13% of the land set aside for the 87% of the population which is Black, contains no gold or diamond mines, no industrial or urban areas.

Again, however, the biggest obstacles to a wise, reasonably objective South African policy are those outlined earlier: the same ones which distort U. S. policy toward the rest of the continent: Racism and fear of communist domination. To measure the degree to which America's vision is clouded, I often ask Americans to try to imagine a reversal of color wherein 4 million Blacks hold control over the lives and destinies of 20 million plus whites. In this fantasy, 250,000 Blacks also hold sway over 6 million whites in Rhodesia. Such a concept is as far beyond one's conditioned grasp as the infinity of space, yet it must be grappled with by the people who really seek a dispassionate, sharply focused overview of current situation. Seen from the Disneyland perspective, it quickly becomes evident that the last white redoubt in Africa enjoys an emotional support from the American majority.

South Africa has taken advantage of the shock waves now radiating throughout the Western world—a shock generated by the growing presence of Cuban troops on African soil. Its stance as the champion of liberty, the brave and lonely bastion against communism, has taken on a new swagger. I do not minimize the possibility of big-power conflict in Southern Africa, but I would urge our policy-makers to re-examine the potential avenues to that conflict. The "bastion against communism," for all of her considerable mineral wealth, strategic location and military might, demands an escalating price of those who directly or indirectly cooperate with and profit from her.

Russia and China have been backing the inevitable winners for years—not because they are more humanitarian than the West, but because they have always known which side of the bread was buttered. The Cubans, if they do not overplay their hand, could provide Russia with the very ammunition she needs to break African alliances with the old colonial powers as well as American influence. The non-military, technical personnel now creating goodwill for the communist nations should be thoughtfully considered as America explores the nature of future alignments. The old, knee-jerk response to the communist world's African involvement, so vigorously encouraged by South Africa, should be reassessed and scrutinized by a wider lens.

The U. S. has recently been treated to a last ditch effort to muddy the already muddy waters of the Rhodesian conflict. Ian Smith told the American public—in a blaze of publicity on his American tour—

what they wanted to hear: That his government was making an honest try at integration across the board. If the West would just embrace him, he said, his mighty army could restore peace. Those foolish or gullible enough to swallow the Smith line could not possibly have swallowed it for long, because even without waiting for a decent interval, Smith displayed his true colors the minute he got back home. First, ignoring the cold shoulder he received from the White House, he crowed that his American odyssey represented a tacit acceptance of his government. Second, he said that unfortunately, wonderful as his intentions had been all along, he wasn't going to make the deadline for the promised free elections after all. The end of the year was much too soon.

This announcement was hardly a surprise to the people of Rhodesia. By rights, it really shouldn't have caused any shock waves in the U. S. either. Smith has yet to fulfill a promise that would seriously threaten white supremacy in Rhodesia.

Also—for anyone who chose to listen to another voice, a former prime minister of Rhodesia was traveling through the United States at the same time as Smith. But Garfield Todd's itinerary didn't attract the hot lights, although his message deserved a careful hearing, for here, finally was something like the truth. Todd stated that the so-called "interim settlement" is a bad joke which will get worse if the West doesn't stand firm in insisting upon a truly representative government such as the one prescribed by the Anglo-American plan. The way things are, whites are fleeing the country—taking with them badly needed expertise—and the economy is eroding to the tune of about 1 million dollars a day. Todd knows the so-called guerilla leaders, Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo, personally, and says they are intelligent men who enjoy the support of the masses. The propaganda about wild-eyed radicals is just that—propaganda.

As an aside, you should be interested to know that most Rhodesians believe that the highly publicized murders of white missionaries and their children weren't committed by the guerillas at all. There is no motivation for the freedom fighters to attack these people, since all but two denominations of missionaries there are squarely behind the rebel groups. Why should they murder people who feed them, take and send messages, provide medical aid, and so on? Significantly, the only two missionary sects to escape attack are the only sects which support the Smith regime.

There have been many outspoken Rhodesians who, as eye-witnesses, state that the real culprits are an elite counter-insurgency unit in the Smith army known as the Selous Scouts. Like highly trained terrorists all over the world, these men assume whatever identity will most harm and discredit the enemy. It doesn't take a Sherlock Holmes to crack this case: The Selous Scouts have probably been pulling off a wildly successful trick: Removing the enemies of the regime and discrediting the freedom fighters at the same time. An informative pamphlet put out by the Washington Office on Africa gives the full story, and because most Americans are so incredulous when I tell this side of the matter, I recommend it highly.

"There is a real danger that America's unwillingness to support the liberation movements (as Russia had done all along) and its willingness to live with the status quo in South Africa could cost America the entire continent in the final analysis."

Rhodesia, of course, would have "graduated" into Zimbabwe—the African name for the country—many years ago if it were not for South Africa. Her vital shipments of oil across the land-locked Rhodesian border have quite literally greased Smith's illegal machinery so steadfastly and so well that a guerilla war was inevitable. And just as South Africa has cradled this white supremacist buffer state to her east, she has kept a tenacious hold on South-west Africa—Namibia—to her west. The United Nations has always given South Africa acute political heartburn, and promise after promise to release the golden goose next door has been broken. The latest South African exercise in nose-thumbing the U.N. took place this fall, when the South African prime minister put a dramatic postscript on his announcement of resignation: His country had considered its pledge to allow a U.N.-supervised free election in Namibia. (Instead, South Africa would oversee an election there in December and the resultant bi-racial "puppet" government would welcome the U.N. in March.)

Need I say what will happen in March when the U.N. prepares to enter the territory and guarantee a truly free election? The puppet government will refuse to co-

operate—*We're doing fine, they'll say, and we're inter-racial, as advertised. What do we need with you?* The farce will have traveled full circle when, helpless and innocent, South Africa says, *it is in no position to help break the impasse. Namibia is all grown up and is entitled to make up its own mind.*

Africa is understandably in full cry over this latest maneuver while Washington, for the most part, seems disinclined to do anything but the most perfunctory scolding. One can be sure that, safe behind the mahogany paneling, boards of companies with South African connections are breaking into cheers throughout the Western world. Once again, that sly old fox with the incredibly rich larder has evaded the hunter.

Sheer numbers, in terms of population, insure the fox's capture eventually, and there are other, more immediate reasons for the United States to take a decisive action. It is chilling to recall that oil-rich Nigeria refused to meet with then Secretary of State Kissinger when he made his historic safari to Africa in 1976, citing America's tacit support of apartheid as the reason. The American balance of trade has shifted from white to Black Africa, and the U. S. can anticipate more of the same in the crucial months ahead. While total American disinvestment from South Africa is viewed by many as a simplistic policy, it is now my firm belief that such a move is not only the morally right course for America to take—it is in the national interest as well. There is a real danger that America's unwillingness to support the Black liberation movements (as Russia has done all along) and its willingness to live with the *status quo* in South Africa could cost America the entire continent in the final analysis. And why not? America's inability to see the larger picture for the immediate business interest paints an unbecoming portrait, to say the least.

To a large extent, the way the United States will go vis a vis Southern Africa policy is up to you. Students and church groups from coast-to-coast are rattling the cage of established power, insisting that their boards of trustees pull out investments from businesses here with an apartheid partnership. I'm beginning to see the same kind of marvelous energy emanating from the young that eventually toppled an entire administration and ended the national disaster that was Vietnam. Black colleges have a particularly important role to play in this movement, and everyone of them has, I believe, an obligation to play it to the hilt. □