

I. INTRODUCTION

Terms of Reference

The primary focus of this paper is present relations between the United States and South Africa. Major attention will be given to governmental actions and policies, economic links, and the actions of non-governmental organizations where they have relevance.

Historical Overview

Before embarking on this major task, it may be helpful to put current policy in perspective. Actions today are an outgrowth of the past. Governmental policies have been responsive over the years to circumstances in the world and especially to developments in Africa. These circumstances have changed remarkably in 30 years - from the 1950s to the 1980s, from the Eisenhower to the Reagan Administrations, in all, seven presidencies. Yet there have been common characteristics descriptive of this policy throughout. Three major themes predominate: 1) southern Africa is viewed within the framework of East-West confrontation; 2) South Africa is seen as the dominant and friendly power in the entire southern Africa region; 3) economic considerations are central in determining United States policy.

It may be useful to recall and comment briefly on these three and on some other common elements that reoccurred consistently despite changing administrations in Washington.

1. *The competitive relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union has been the major factor in determining policy towards Africa.* United States initiatives have frequently followed periods of crisis to counter or match Soviet actions. For example, scholarships for South African students to come to the United States increased sharply in the early 1960s under President Kennedy. This was because of the exodus of students from South Africa after Sharpeville, and the dramatic growth of a student programme in the Soviet Union. United States initiatives toward a Namibian settlement came largely in response to the MPLA victory in Angola, won with Soviet and Cuban support.

Particularly for Henry Kissinger, United States policy in Africa reflected a global strategy in which African realities were secondary to a perceived Soviet challenge. This policy was tempered during the early Carter years by the recognition that internal factors, such as colonial rule, poverty, and repression affected popular action. But even though Secretary of State Vance said, "The continued denial of racial justice in southern Africa encourages the possibilities for outside intervention,"¹ the dominant theme of policy was that ending an unjust system was the key to forestalling racial war and reducing Soviet influence.

¹ Houser, George, "United States Policy in Southern Africa," *Christianity and Crisis*, 19 September 1977.

2. *Policy toward Africa in general and South Africa in particular has on the whole had a low standing in the list of priorities of United States Administrations for reasons closely related to the general preoccupation with East-West relations.* Most frequently, the policy has been a reactive one, rather than an initiating one. During much of the Eisenhower Administration (1952-1960) the focus was on Europe and there was virtually no policy toward Africa at all. The continent was almost wholly under colonial domination. It is an indication of how little the United States appreciated developments in Africa, that the United States abstained on the watershed United Nations (General Assembly) resolution 1514 of 1960 on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. During the Eisenhower years, the United States never agreed to wording in the United Nations resolutions “condemning” apartheid. Before 1960, “regret and concern” was as far as the United States would go.

With the pressure of the Sharpeville massacre, stronger positions were taken. The United States statement in the General Assembly “abhorred” apartheid for the first time. Adlai Stevenson, Kennedy’s Ambassador to the United Nations, proposed and voted for an arms embargo against South Africa. However, the United States also authorized the sale of helicopters and executive civilian-type aircraft to South Africa, which could be converted for the military use of the South African Air Commandos.

More initiating policies followed the coup in Portugal in 1974. The end of Portuguese colonialism was the spur. Dr. Kissinger inaugurated a shuttle diplomacy toward the end of the Nixon Administration and this continued during the Carter years. The United States took an active role in dealing with both the Rhodesian and Namibian issues. But on the whole, United States policy has been non-initiating and characterized by an attitude of reluctant concern.

3. *The United States has adopted a non-confrontational policy toward colonial and apartheid regimes, despite its criticism of these States.* The United States has always had closer ties with South Africa than with any other country in southern Africa, and has always seen it as the key power in the region, to be dealt with as an erring friend rather than more severely. The Nixon Administration enunciated this policy by using the terms “communication” and “dialogue.” Its 1969-1970 Foreign Policy Report says, “We do not believe that isolating them (South Africa) from the influence of the rest of the world is an effective way of encouraging them to follow a course of moderation and to accommodate change.”²

In the United Nations, as African demands became more insistent, United States’ negative votes were more pronounced. In the 1972 General Assembly, for instance, of eight resolutions on southern Africa and colonialism, the United States voted against seven and abstained on one. As a further indication of “communication” in response to Vorster’s so-called enlightened “*verligte*” policy, the United States encouraged prominent American sports figures and entertainers to visit South Africa.

² Houser, George, *United States Policy and South Africa*, The Africa Fund, 1974, p. 30.

During the early part of the Carter Administration, language was more confrontational. Vice President Mondale, meeting with Prime Minister Vorster in Vienna in 1977, said, “We think apartheid is discriminatory ... if South Africa persists in its ideology, our paths will diverge and our policies come in conflict.”³ Yet, despite the harder language and moves to impose an arms embargo, the Carter Administration did not break with any of the traditional tenets of United States regional policy.

4. *United States policy toward southern Africa has been shaped by economic concerns, including the preservation of access to strategic minerals and the protection of markets and investments.* Most Administrations have argued for the importance of trade and investments as a means of encouraging change in apartheid.

The official policy enunciated by the Kennedy Administration was that the United States “neither encourages nor discourages” trade and investment with South Africa. Yet investment with high returns continued to grow. Some 15 years later, the Carter Administration saw investment as the key to change. The President said, “The use of economic leverage against what is, after all, a government system of repression within South Africa, seems to me the only way to achieve racial justice there.”⁴ The United States has always opposed any sort of economic sanctions against South Africa.

5. *Every United States Administration has claimed an anti-colonialist, anti-racist bias in its policy toward Africa, including southern and South Africa.* This was more believable in the early 1950s, before the dynamics of the struggle for independence put the policy to the test. But the anti-colonial tradition found in the United States’ own Declaration of Independence has been a frequent reference point. Further, the civil rights struggle, although an embarrassment, because of the flaws it revealed in United States society, was presented as both a sign of a severe problem in United States race relations, and as an indication of an honest intent to solve the problem.

6. *The United States has consistently emphasized the necessity of peaceful change in South Africa.* This was enunciated most clearly by the Nixon Administration in 1972, when guerilla warfare was in full swing in southern Africa. The Assistant Secretary of State David Newson said, “We do not believe (violence) is a feasible answer ... We do not believe it is a just answer, because violence hardly brings justice to all ... We cannot expect change to come quickly or easily, our hope is that it will come peacefully.”⁵

Thus, the United States voted against a United Nations resolution which sanctioned the use of “all means available” in the struggle against apartheid, arguing that this put the stamp of approval on violence.

7. *The United States has maintained, at best, a distant relationship with*

³ Houser, *op. cit.*, *Christianity and Crisis*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Houser, *United States Policy and South Africa*, p.30.

the liberation movements throughout southern Africa. This result flows inevitably from a policy that advocates greater investments in South Africa when the liberation movement champions sanctions, or which preaches non-confrontation and peaceful change during a period of growing violence. The United States opposed such a minor proposal as admitting representatives of the liberation movements to be observers in relevant United Nations committee discussions. During the Kissinger years under Nixon and Ford, the liberation movements were looked upon as almost irrelevant. The famous National Security Study Memorandum 39 put emphasis only on the minority white regimes as possible agents of change. During the Kennedy and Carter years, relations with the liberation movements were more relaxed than at other times, but even during the final stages of the coming to independence of Zimbabwe, the United States tended always to seek an escape from accepting the leadership of the liberation movement.

In summary then, the United States obsession with East-West relationships and the refusal to recognize “on the ground” reality have prevented policymakers from carving out a more creative policy. The United States seems unable to appreciate that the fundamental problem in South Africa is apartheid, because South Africa is perceived as a potential ally in a global competition with the Soviet Union. The United States has also given far too little attention to the liberation struggle. This is not surprising when its policy is based on non-confrontation with the white minority and the need to perpetuate a climate safe for United States investment. Under Reagan, these problems have simply become more stark.