

II. RECENT UNITED STATES POLICIES - “CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT”

Early in the life of the Reagan Administration, the policy of “constructive engagement” was enunciated. Observers foresaw no sharp breaks with past policy, although a pronounced “tilt” toward the white minority régime was immediately discernable. In his first major southern Africa policy speech delivered in August 1981, Assistant Secretary of State Crocker declared: “It is not our task to choose between black and white. We will not lend our voice to support those dedicated to seizing or holding power through violence.”⁶

Within three weeks there was a new emphasis on all those aspects of policy commonly characterized as the carrot approach, while the stick was laid to rest in a closet. Soon, Pik Botha was visiting the White House, the first Foreign Minister from Africa to be welcomed by President Reagan, while the Chief of Pretoria’s Military Intelligence lunched secretly with the United States Ambassador to the United Nations. The United States vetoed a resolution in the United Nations Security Council to impose sanctions on South Africa because of its intransigence on Namibia, and cast the only vote against a Security Council condemnation of South Africa’s invasion of Angola.

Administration spokesmen argued that such a policy was realistic and necessary, in order to re-establish Pretoria’s trust in the United States, thus creating a climate in which South Africa would agree to a negotiated settlement for Namibian independence and begin the process of peaceful reform of apartheid.

In fact, far from resolving the crisis confronting southern Africa, this policy served only to exacerbate it.

In decrying what it termed as intensifying “cycle of violence” in the region, the United States refused to hold the guilty party, the South African State, responsible for the wholesale regional destruction of peace and stability. Thus encouraged, Pretoria set out to consolidate its power by intensifying violently repressive modes at home, while continuing the illegal occupation of Namibia and launching an aggressive campaign of military, political and economic destabilization against newly-independent neighbouring States.

South Africa’s purpose in launching these attacks seemed twofold. On the one hand, it intended to re-establish the *cordon sanitaire* which had long protected its

⁶ Crocker, Chester, “Regional Strategy for Southern Africa,” United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, Washington, D.C., *Current Policy*, No. 308, 29 August 1981.

borders and was lost by the popular defeats of Portuguese colonialism and Rhodesian settler State rule. The liberation movement in Namibia and South Africa was to be choked or starved to death, cut off from rear bases and active supply lines.

But beyond this, South Africa was seeking to establish its absolute dominance as the regional power. It seemed determined to crush all attempts being made by countries such as Mozambique and Zimbabwe to throw off their colonially-created economic dependency on South Africa. Even small assertions of independence provoked angry retaliation. The attempt by Front-line States to set up a regional planning authority, the Southern Africa Development Co-ordination Conference, was seen as a threat, to be actively countered in the interests of a proposed South Africa-centred “Constellation of States.”

It is in this context that a significant shift can be discerned in United States policy. Moving well past any “tilt,” however precipitous, in South Africa’s direction, the Reagan Administration appears to have assigned the white majority régime the role of active agent implementing Washington’s own regional strategies.

There seems considerable evidence that this Administration has proceeded further than any other in identifying its own interests with those of the South African State. As part of this process, it has sought then to increase the sway of South Africa over all States in the region, and has openly sought to change the direction of States it regards as inimical to United States interests, such as Angola and Mozambique. As can be demonstrated in the case of Angola, it has proceeded both directly, by refusing to grant recognition to this State, while continuing to deal with “contras” such as Jonas Savimbi and UNITA, and less directly by its condonation of, its not involvement in, South Africa’s military aggression.

A Regional Strategy

This shaping and reshaping of the societies of southern Africa in the United States interest, is perhaps the most important, but least publicized aim of the policy of constructive engagement.

Foreshadowing its increasingly interventionist actions, in 1981, Chester Crocker laid out United States aims in southern Africa as follows: “We seek to expand (author’s emphasis) and to assist that group of nations whose development policies produce economic progress and which have working democratic institutions.”⁷

The second half of this strategy was even more boldly laid out in a secret briefing memorandum prepared for Secretary of State Haig by Chester Crocker in May

⁷ *Ibid.*

1981. According to this memorandum, ".If the South Africans co-operate: to achieve an internationally acceptable settlement (for Namibia), this will greatly facilitate efforts to deal effectively with the Soviet threat.... A relationship initiated on a co-operative basis could move forward toward a future in which South Africa returns to a place within the regional framework of Western security interests... We can, however, work to end South Africa's polecat status in the world ..."⁸

Thus, current United States policy seems to be based on a desire for regional peace and stability and the creation of an environment in which United States trade, investment and strategic interests can flourish. But as that peace appears to be predicated on the existence of a powerful apartheid-dominated South African State, it cannot flourish. South Africa's black majority has been many years on the march already, seeking freedom. It is unlikely to abandon its struggle in the interests of regional detente. True regional peace can only follow the ending of apartheid rule.

This section has sought merely to sketch the main thrust of United States policy in the last few years. A more detailed examination of some of the key areas of United States-South Africa interaction follows. It will serve to indicate both the extent of support being supplied to apartheid from the United States, and also the growing opposition to that support now being expressed across the country, from Georgia to Oregon, Illinois, Nebraska and Arizona.

⁸ Cited in Leonard, Richard, *South Africa at War*, Lawrence Hill and Co., 1983, p. 259.