

Advance Platform Hearings of the Democratic National Committee

Philadelphia, April 28, 1960

Statement of Peter Weiss, Vice-Chairman, American Committee on Africa

My name is Peter Weiss. I am a lawyer engaged in international practice in New York, a founder and Vice-Chairman of the American Committee on Africa and an editor of the magazine "Africa Today". I have visited Africa several times, most recently four months ago, when I attended, as an observer, the meetings of the All-Africa Peoples' Conference in Tunis and the Economic Commission for Africa in Tangier.

The American Committee on Africa, a national non-partisan organization which, for the past six years, has attempted to interpret the significance of African developments to the American people, is happy to respond to the invitation of the Democratic National Committee to present its views on American foreign policy at these platform hearings. No area of national policy is more important in these times, when the whole world may be likened to one of Rube Goldberg's fantastic creations, each part linked to each other part in devious, yet irresistible ways, so that movement at any point produces some change, although rarely of a predictable nature, at every other point.

At the same time, no area of national policy is further removed from popular control and therefore more typical of the shortcomings of democracy in the age of mass communications. Any initiative which aims to correct this defect in our political structure, like the one which has led to the calling of these hearings, is therefore warmly to be welcomed.

It is impossible to conceive of an American policy on Africa as separate from an American foreign policy in general. The following remarks, while focused on Africa because that is the only area in which my Committee has any particular competence, are therefore not to be regarded as a special plea for Africa, but merely as the application to Africa of certain principles which ought, in our opinion, to underly the formulation of American policy towards any part of the world.

The first requirement of such a policy, then, is the determination to have a policy at all. Until a very short time ago, our government's African policy was characterized mainly by its absence, or rather, by a set of two directly contrary principles which canceled each other out. The first of these was our traditional sympathy for the aspirations of all peoples towards freedom from alien rule. The second was a tacit resolve to consider Africa as primarily a European sphere of influence and not to offend our European allies by a too active interest in the independence movements in their African colonies.

The following quotation will illustrate my point: "It is the policy of our government to support the attainment of freedom by all peoples who, by their acts, show themselves worthy of it and ready for it". The words are not those of Cecil Rhodes, author of the slogan "equality for all civilized men", but of Dean Acheson, spoken in his capacity as Secretary of State in 1949.

The justification of this policy of countervailing balances, which, ironically, has reaped a harvest of suspicion and ill-will both in Africa and Europe, was the so-called reality of cold war politics, which made the preservation of the Western Alliance the overriding consideration in our general outlook on the world. In retrospect, however, one cannot escape the conclusion that these decisions were based in large measure simply on erroneous judgment due to inadequate information. I well remember the utter disbelief - derisiveness would be a better word - with which most of the members of one of our consular missions in Africa which I visited in 1957 received the opinion of the lone dissenter in their midst that all French West and Equatorial Africa would be independent within six years. As of today, even this estimate is likely to prove conservative.

One result of this lack of information and judgment on the part of our foreign service officers who were or should have been concerned with Africa was our total lack of preparation for General de Gaulle's offer of independence to the French African territories in September, 1958. It is true that no one was more surprised by this offer than the French, but that is no excuse for us; de Gaulle simply gauged accurately the mood of Africa; we, as outsiders, should have been able to do the same, had we looked

at Africa as outsiders, rather than through European eyes.

The cost of this lack of judgment has already been high. One direct result was our failure to anticipate the independence of Guinea or to do anything about it once it happened, resulting in a marked shift of Guinean sympathies towards Eastern Europe.

I am not, therefore, merely calling for an affirmation of moral principle over strategic expedient. What I am suggesting is that, if we had our diplomatic ears closer to the ground, we would be forced less often to sacrifice moral principles to strategic expedients, because we would then be more aware of the power of popular forces throughout the world, like those represented by the African freedom movement, so that the moral choice and the strategic choice would more frequently coincide.

To be specific, I suggest that you may want to give consideration to including in your foreign policy platform a call for a radical overhaul of the personnel policies and other aspects of our foreign service which make it difficult for our diplomats to find out what is going on beyond the immediate confines of their offices and the cocktail party circuit. Another way to put it is that the foreign service needs to take a leaf from the book of the United States Information Agency, or, to reduce the proposition to its simplest form, we need more ambassadors like Chester Bowles.

If I spoke above of what used to be wrong with our African policy, I did not mean to imply that everything is right with it now. It must be recognized, however, even by Democratic platform drafters casting a critical glance at a Republican administration, that a tremendous change has come over our African policy during the past year. No longer do we cast an embarrassed abstaining vote when asked, in the United Nations, to condemn South African apartheid, or actively support Portugal's fiction that its colonies are merely "overseas provinces". The State Department has even taken the unprecedented step of condemning the South African Government for the wanton killing of unarmed demonstrators.

These are all steps in the right direction. They are steps taken in haste, as if in a belated attempt to reach a receding goal. If the Democratic platform were to define that goal in order to enable us, as a nation, to catch up with it, the definition would, in the opinion of my Committee, have to read something like this:

United States policy on Africa should be based on the assumption that, in a few years, all of Africa will be under the control of its indigenous populations and that democratic government in Africa is possible only by implementing the principle of "one man - one vote", with the rights of minorities safeguarded by law as they are in our own federal system, but with all vestiges of special privilege based on race or geographical origin abolished.

Each area of the vast African continent, of course, presents its own special problems. It is impossible to deal with these in the compass of this brief statement; we believe, however, that the overall policy suggested above is equally applicable to Algeria and the Union of South Africa, to the Rhodesias and to the ten million Africans living under the brutal oppression of one of our NATO allies, Portugal, who are still forgotten by the world, but only for a very short time longer.

The better part of Africa will be free at the end of this year; the rest of it, with or without our help, will be free within the next decade. My Committee believes that the cornerstone of our policy toward independent Africa should be technical and economic aid adequate in scope to translate this independence into freedom from want and ignorance. We believe that the present scope is grossly inadequate, and that, if nothing is done to make it adequate, the African countries will either have to turn to the Communist bloc for the help they need or adopt methods of capital formation incompatible with our notions of a free society.

We also urge, as Paul Hoffman did in his excellent recent pamphlet entitled "One Hundred Countries, One and One Quarter Billion People", that international development aid be channeled through the United Nations and its associated agencies. In this

connection, we are disturbed by the current proposals for a new economic organization, outside the United Nations, to coordinate Western aid to underdeveloped countries. We believe such an organization would intensify cold war tensions and belittle the role of the United Nations. The Africans most certainly do not like this scheme; if one of its aims is to maintain the Western presence in Africa, it might not be amiss to ask their opinion on the method by which this aim is to be achieved.

To sum up, we commend the following policy goals to your consideration:

1. An overhaul of the foreign service designed to keep it in tune with history in the making.
2. An African policy based on the assumption that all Africa will be free two Presidential elections hence.
3. A sympathetic attitude toward the efforts of the people of Africa to abolish the artificial frontiers imposed on them in the heyday of colonialism and to group themselves into economically, politically and ethnically viable regional units.
4. A declaration of war on want, for which we would appropriate at least one percent of our national income annually, and which we would determine not to get confused with the cold war.

Thank you for your attention. The American Committee on Africa should like, with your permission, to submit a supplementary statement dealing in somewhat greater detail with specific aspects of our African policy. It will also be happy, in such a statement, to expand on any points which may be of particular interest to this panel.