

Why South Africa?

An Analysis of the Square One Policy of Reduced Involvement - Communications with irregular regimes

By Gary Gappert

The question is sometimes asked: Why South Africa? Why are liberals and other Americans of conscience always calling for action against South Africa? It seems contradictory that American liberals call for increased communications with Cuba and China but are also appealing for an end to communications with South Africa. Why disengage from South Africa and not from other "bad" governments?

First, let us note that South Africa is the only racist dictatorship. In today's world of increased racial polarization, the relentless imposition of a racist totalitarian system takes on a highly magnifide importance.

Second, the totality of oppression in South Africa is unique. It applies not only in the political sphere, but also in the economic, social, cultural, and recreational, etc. There is not any way in which the individual black African can escape apartheid even for a moment. There is no way for the black man in South Africa to escape from the system within the country itself. In other countries such as Spain, Cuba, Russia, etc., those who politically conform may be able to buy themselves into the system. Religious, political and other forms of oppression can always be surmounted by a certain amount of conformity to the system. In South Africa this conformity is not possible. The black man remains black, and remains persecuted, even though he might very well want to conform with the system.

Third, the United States has been engaged with apartheid for 20 years. The Nationalist government in South Africa has been in power for that long and has gotten more and more oppressive every year. Each year harsher and harsher legislation is enacted as the white regime in South Africa seeks to make its racial dictatorship more secure. What good has our engagement with South Africa been for these last 20 years? What kind of communications have we had with the South Africans which have made them more oppressive? Let us then return to square one, to a position of greatly reduced involvement. From that position, whenever South Africa wants to change, we will have something to offer in return for a liberalization of its regime. As it is, South Africa has gained greatly from our involvement with her and has used our economic support to reinforce itself and to make itself more secure and less

vulnerable to outside influence.

We might note that the program of building bridges to the East which the U.S. is following in Eastern Europe has been developed step by step. Concessions have followed liberalization, liberalization has followed concessions and so on. It has been a step by step process by which we have become more engaged in Eastern Europe as they in turn have become more liberal. Let us begin the same process with South Africa. Let us reduce our level of involvement and then begin a process of trade and negotiation as South Africa sees itself in a position in which she shall want to become more liberal.

Fourth, not only is there no evidence that our present level of involvement has had a positive communications effect, there is evidence that the reverse has been the case. The Americans communicating with the South African system have been more influenced by it than not.

In one survey conducted last year by Business Intelligence Services Ltd., in Johannesburg, 81 per cent of the American businessmen replying to a questionnaire indicated a positive feeling towards South Africa and its system.

Over a third of the businessmen replying indicated that if they were voting in South Africa, they would vote for the Nationalist Party which was the party which introduced the apartheid system. Another third would vote for the white supremacist United Party while only 15 percent would vote for the multi-racial Progressive Party.

It can also be claimed that the average American visitor to South Africa never has a chance to see the real inequities of the system but receives charming attention from his white host.

Likewise there is no evidence that the American officials have a positive communications effect. The U.S. government still refuses to integrate its own diplomatic and technical teams in South Africa.

Until there is some evidence that communications with South Africa have positive results, liberal Americans must suggest that the current high level of involvement - communications with South Africa be reduced (not ruptured) to a more limited amount.

Fifth, a final reason for changing the American level of involvement in South Africa is the realization that it is just historically inevitable that 3 million white people will be unable to continue to dominate more than

10 million non-white people for any sustained period of time in the future. Change is inevitable in South Africa. Even if we reject the moral reasons for supporting change in South Africa, it is only prudent to be aware of the historical forces which are inevitably working themselves out in South Africa.

Still another reason for reducing communications with South Africa is that communications with South Africa have been a one way process. The restrictions on American visitors have been severe. American non-whites are not permitted to travel in South Africa. Many apolitical professionals and journalists have been denied admission to South Africa. South Africa carefully controls the admission process so only Americans who might be favorably disposed towards their "problem" will be admitted. Further, once the visitor is admitted, he is prohibited by law from interacting with the black majority in South Africa. It is also true that Americans in neighboring countries have difficulty in obtaining transit visas through South Africa. Peace Corps Volunteers in Botswana and Lesotho are usually denied visas to visit South Africa. In addition, South Africa carefully regulates which South Africans may visit the U.S. and other countries. An "open door" policy with South Africa is a joke.

In concluding let us note that our current engagement with South Africa is normal but not neutral. Calling for a policy of disengagement from South Africa is similar to calling for a policy of vigorous neutrality with respect to South Africa. Normal relationships are not neutral; they carry with them a whole set of institutional and bureaucratic relationships which propel our engagement and involvement with South Africa ever deeper. To reverse these forces, to rid our relationships of institutional racism, demands a policy of active disengagement. Disengagement is not a punitive action, it is a neutralizing action. It does not demand a rupture in communications but calls for a reduction of the level of involvement - communication. Dis-involvement with South Africa at this time is the only prudent course for a far-sighted American government.