

## CONFRONTATION ABOVE SOUTH WEST AFRICA

### A Case History of Nonviolent Direct Action in International Relations by Private Citizens

The use of nonviolent direct action techniques in international affairs, either by nations or individuals, is rare. This case history is reported to aid in the analysis of this particular action in order to see what might be learned from it about the use of nonviolent techniques in the international field.

#### Objectives:

The basic objective of the project was to support and dramatize the United Nations resolution taking over authority for South West Africa. If South Africa, the de facto power in the territory, allowed us to do so, a second objective was to explore ways private U.S. organizations might help social and economic development in South West Africa. If South Africa refused us entry--as was expected and did happen--an alternative objective was to dramatize the South African rejection of the U.N. resolutions.

The objective was reported in a statement meant to be delivered to South African authorities, which we did not get to deliver, as follows:

"We have come to South West Africa as private American citizens concerned with the economic and social development of South West Africa. We recognize the authority of the United Nations for the administration of South West Africa under Resolution 2145, and wish to find ways private American organizations can help the United Nations in the development of democratic means of assisting the people of South West Africa to share fully in the benefits and responsibilities of today's world.

"As individuals, we have wide experience in Africa and elsewhere in co-operatives, nutrition, health, agriculture, and community development. We have personal affiliations with numerous American organizations which do excellent work in these fields. It is our intention to talk with persons knowledgeable in these fields in South West Africa, in order to build specific program suggestions.

"This is an exploratory trip. We come without specific ideas as to how non-governmental organizations can be the most helpful. We are glad to talk with all persons who wish to discuss development with us."

#### The Plan:

The basic plan for the project was to fly into South West Africa a group of U.S. citizens technically competent to carry out development program exploration. The group did not obtain visas, the key thrust of the project being that the United Nations had taken jurisdiction for the territory; therefore, South Africa, the de facto power, had no authority to issue visas or otherwise restrict travel to SWA. The U.N. has established a council to administer SWA. That council has established no visa requirements, so as far as international law was concerned, no visas were required. The plan violated no U.S. travel regulations.

The project was carried out in the name of the Committee for the Development of an Independent South West Africa, an ad hoc committee organized specifically for this project.

Implementation:

An interracial group of five actually made the attempted flight from Lusaka, Zambia, to Windhoek, SWA, on December 6, 1967. Those on the flight included: George Houser, executive director of the American Committee on Africa, who has worked for years on African problems, specializing on the problems of independence movements; Dr. Flemmie P. Kittrell, chairman of the Department of Home Economics, Howard University, an expert in nutrition with experience in work on nutrition problems in both Africa and Asia; Dr. John L. S. Holloman, M.D., former head of the National Medical Association; Samuel F. Ashelman, consultant on cooperatives and food distribution, with extensive experience in the U.S. and overseas, including Africa, in advising governments on cooperatives and assisting in co-op organizations; Lyle Tatum, executive secretary of Farmers and World Affairs, who lived in Southern Africa for four years representing a non-profit organization establishing community development and other programs. I am currently responsible for various overseas projects in relation to farm organizations.

Four expected participants--a U.S. Congressman, a labor leader, a church leader, and the president of a state farm organization--dropped out of the project, for reasons unrelated to the project, at the last minute. Two of these dropped out because of personal emergencies after actually leaving New York with the team.

Three newspaper reporters, two Zambian and one British, accompanied the team on the flight. The flight was made in two chartered Piper Aztecs, which carry five passengers each. The charter company asked no questions about visas or the purpose of the trip, but merely contracted for the flight. Neither the number of passengers, nor the possibility of some or all passengers flying round-trip rather than one-way affected the cost.

The planes left Lusaka early in the morning, and flew to Livingstone where they refueled, and Zambian customs and immigration formalities for leaving the country were completed. All participants carried visas for re-entry into Zambia.

Houser, Kittrell, and I, with a reporter from a Zambian newspaper, were in the lead plane. Holloman, Ashelman, and two reporters followed about ten minutes behind in the second. The planes were out of sight of one another but able to maintain radio contact.

From Livingstone, the plane route went across the corner of Rhodesia before entering Botswana. Soon after leaving Livingstone, Rhodesian police radioed the planes that they had received word from South African police that the passengers did not have visas and would not be allowed to enter SWA. This was the first indication the pilot had that anything out of the ordinary was going on. In each plane, the pilots checked and were told we had no visas, but were continuing to Windhoek. This word was relayed to Rhodesian police, who made no response, and by that time the planes were over Botswana.

Our pilot in the lead plane commented that we could probably straighten

out the visa problem at the airport. At that point, we gave him a copy of our statement for SWA officials, which summarized the project. The other pilot was also given the plan of the trip by his passengers. Neither pilot indicated any resistance to the plan, and the planes flew on.

We flew for over an hour and were well within SWA, when the South African police contacted us. We were asked for the names of all passengers, and this information was given. We were told that they had an important message for us. They would read it twice and we should copy it down. In essence, the message was that our mission was known, and that unless the papers of the aircraft, the pilot, and of all passengers met all of the local legal requirements, we were not to land in Windhoek, nor anywhere else in SWA, and that if we disregarded the warning, we would have to face the consequences.

At this point, the pilot turned the plane toward Botswana. He tried to get permission to land for fuel, as did the other pilot, but that permission was denied. We tried unsuccessfully to get the pilot to land, but he refused fearing confiscation of his plane.

We headed for a grass landing strip in Maun, Botswana. En route, the twin motors sputtered as we ran out of fuel. The pilot switched in a reserve tank and we found the air strip where they had enough gas stored in metal drums to refuel the planes. We clearly could not have made it back to Livingstone. The pilot reported that we were within ten minutes of Windhoek when we turned back.

At Maun we met to consider whether to fly back to Lusaka or to fly to Sesheke, Zambia. At Sesheke, near the border between Zambia and the SWA Caprivi strip, we had land rovers waiting for us. If the charter planes had refused to make the flight, or become unavailable to us for any reason, or if we had been turned back at the SWA border, it was our intention to drive in the land rovers to the SWA border post, which is actually a short way inside the Caprivi strip, and attempt to enter there. Although there was no expectation of being allowed to enter, it would give us face-to-face confrontation with South African officials.

The group decided at Maun that the dramatic twentieth century confrontation a mile high in the air fulfilled our objectives as much as could reasonably be expected, and that driving up to the border afterwards would be anti-climatic, although admittedly giving us a better score for persistence.

We returned to Lusaka, getting back just after dark, having spent 14 hours or so, mostly bouncing around in small planes amid the clouds and showers of the Southern African rainy season.

At eight o'clock the next morning, we sent the following telegram to South African Prime Minister Voerster: "We strongly protest South African police refusal to allow us to land at Windhoek yesterday. The pilot yielded to police threats, although committee willing to contest your consequences for our act carried out under international law. Your government fears to hold discussions with peaceful advocates of development, once more exposes your callousness to the welfare of the African people."

The telegram was released to the public at a press conference held later that morning. As might be expected, no acknowledgement of receipt of the telegram has been received.

Background Information:

The possibility of an SWA project was explored initially by Jim Bristol, Walter Martin, George Houser, and me early in 1967. We shared considerable African experience and concern at the general lack of movement toward solving South Africa's cancerous race problem, particularly in relation to SWA now that, on paper, the U.N. was responsible for the territory, while in fact not much was happening.

We held a number of brainstorming sessions, and talked with others on the side. The four of us continued as the core of the project until Jim's heart attack, which removed him from activity for several months, and left the three of us to carry on.

Land rovers, sail boats, marches, and planes were all considered as methods of making an SWA confrontation. Why were we trying to go to SWA? That was the basic question. This was all hammered out within the context of the idea that we would go to SWA under the U.N. resolution without South African visas, an early decision to be implemented if certain other unknowns fell into place properly.

We felt that SWA's apartheid problem had been adequately researched and discarded the possibility of going in for that purpose. We were not attracted to simple protest. It gradually seemed clear that from our American non-profit organizational backgrounds, it made the most sense to send in experts who could explore, report, and sell development projects to private organizations in the U.S.

This decision made an entrance by foot or sail boat artificial, as that is not the way organizations go about developing international program. Commercial flights might have been more regular, but such flights into Windhoek are limited, and airlines require visas for countries of destination. We assumed, perhaps hastily, that commercial flights into Windhoek went by South African law rather than international law. A charter flight seemed the natural solution.

A charter flight out of Angola, South Africa, or Rhodesia was out of the question for obvious reasons. Botswana, Zambia, Tanzania, and Malawi were possibilities. Not wishing to further strain the difficulties geography has placed on Botswana, we looked into possibilities in Zambia, and found the two Aztecs we eventually used were available. These planes gave us an arbitrary limit of ten as the maximum number of participants.

Partly for expediency in working up the project, and partly because we wished to make an American effort on a problem where official American action has been minimal, we decided to have all participants be U.S. citizens. Although we realized we might be giving Negroes a rough experience if we did get into SWA, we purposely recruited an interracial team. Actual recruitment turned out to be easy.

Again, partly for expediency, we did not seek official organizational sponsorship. Although some such sponsorship could have been obtained, it would have been a time-consuming and a resource-diverting process. We favored flexibility in action, both in planning and in implementation. Thus the Committee

for the Development of an Independent South West Africa was born. Financing was by contributions specifically solicited for the project.

Off the record discussions were held with members of the U.N. delegations, key members of the U.N. Secretariat, and officials of the Zambian government, to be certain that the project would not embarrass our friends. The time of the project was set by our conclusion that it must be implemented while the General Assembly of the U.N. was still in session. It was impossible to implement the project earlier in the 1967 session of the General Assembly.

#### Discussion of Problems:

There were a number of problems of both tactics and principles in implementing this project, and sometimes it was difficult to distinguish between them. Many problems of both kinds which we did not even recognize at the time may come to light as we subject the project to analysis and evaluation. The ordinary difficulties of administrating, financing, and recruiting participants, and so forth, were carried through with no special problem. The off the record clearance with officials went well and was appreciated by those contacted. No formal adoption of a discipline by the participants was necessary, as participants accepted membership in a project already outlined. Decisions along the way were reached easily by "sense of the meeting" with this small congenial group, although there were differences of opinion on issues.

The main problems revolved around the semi-secrecy with which the project was clothed. It was felt necessary to maintain as much secrecy as possible in order not to scare off the charter company, and not to alert South Africa. The first objective was met. The second was not. We went on the assumption that South Africa would learn in advance of the flight, and that proved to be the case.

A negative aspect of the secrecy was the reduction of publicity. At one point, we thought we would hold a news conference in New York just before leaving, then another in London and a third in Nairobi, en route. This would make possible news stories in advance of the flight, thus building interest in the project. These plans for a public announcement, even two days in advance of the flight, were killed on the advice of persons whose judgment we respected.

It was felt that public alerting of South Africa in advance might do a number of things. Botswana has a strong economic dependency on South Africa, combined with a hatred of apartheid, and an advance announcement could cause South Africa to put pressure on Botswana to prevent our flying over that country, the most direct route and a near necessity. No publicity allowed both countries to act as if they knew nothing about the flight.

Advance publicity, with the eyes of the world on the project, might have caused South Africa to feel compelled to guard her borders and prevent our entering her air space, so that we wouldn't even get into SWA, let alone to Windhoek.

We did not know the reliance, if any, of the charter company on South African business. Many businesses in Zambia have South African ties. South

African pressure might cause the company to cancel or the controversial publicity could cause the company to cancel. A recognized weakness from the beginning, which did prevent our final landing in Windhoek, was that we did not have ultimate control of the planes.

There were breaks in the secrecy as expected. Some of these are known to us, and demonstrate both lack of integrity and carelessness, but there is no point in beating a dead horse. Disclosure was inevitable. It was necessary to confer with many persons at the U.N., government and private individuals on Zambia, prospective recruits, and prospective donors in this country whose families also became involved automatically, boards of organizations with staff member relationships to the project, and newsmen for advance alerts for publicity. Perhaps the most remarkable result was that neither U.S. officials nor the charter pilots knew of the project before we reported it to them. We have learned that the South African office at the U.N. had some knowledge of the project at least a week before the flight.

U.S. officials were not told, not because of any expectation of adverse reaction on their part, but only because there was no rationale for telling them far in advance. No U.S. regulations of any type would be violated, and as the State Department pointed out in releases to newspapers after the project, the U.S. voted in favor of the U.N. resolution under which we were acting. We did not wish to catch U.S. officials off guard by our actions, so word was left in Washington and at the U.N. to alert the proper officials the day before we flew. The U.S. Ambassador in Zambia was given the entire story two days before the flight. The entire team visited him on our return to Lusaka from Windhoek. Our relationships have been cordial with U.S. officials both in Zambia and the U.S.

Secrecy with the charter company was largely a matter of just not volunteering information not requested. No questions were asked, either about visas or about the purpose of the flight until word came over the plane radios to the pilots that we had no visas. At that point, we told our story, but the attitude of the pilots still seemed to be a professional one, that we had hired a plane to fly us, and they were carrying out the contract.

The charter company had requested permission to fly across the corner of Rhodesia. The day before the flight, Rhodesia requested the names of the passengers. At this point, not wishing to lose the project on a side issue by giving our names to Rhodesia, we committed the one act of giving misleading information. Both George Houser and I are prohibited immigrants in Rhodesia, and we expected to take a Zambian newspaper woman whose African name might raise questions about going to SWA. We replied that we were not certain of the final list, which was true because of some juggling around of news people, and gave a list of names which did not include the three which might alert Rhodesia. It was a list of passengers expected. We were over Rhodesia only about three minutes, and it could have been avoided, as it was on our return flight.

Reporters were not originally seen as part of the trip. This question came up when it became apparent that reporters in Zambia would like to go along. Since we had empty seats, we could take them without cost to us. It seemed a way to improve our publicity, so we took three reporters. This turned out to be a good decision.

Another problem was face to face confrontation. If, as happened, we couldn't land in Windhoek, there would be no face to face confrontation, an element assumed essential in nonviolent direct action. There was a real confrontation via radio with positions clear-cut and understood, although no opportunity for conversational exchange.

If we had used our alternative plan, and driven to the border, we would have met South African officials face to face, but they would have been far down the bureaucratic scale, and geographically far from where we wished to go. In the Windhoek airport, a force of 30 police officers, headed by the top police official of the Territory, were waiting for us and handling their side of the airborne confrontation. The drama of the confrontation resulted in subsequent public expression to the press by South African Prime Minister Voerster on more than one occasion.

#### Conclusion:

All five participants felt that the project was successful. There was a general disappointment about not having actually landed at Windhoek, but it was felt that the major objectives of the project were fulfilled, and many minor objectives, not articulated in advance although hoped for, had also been met. No negative results have been evident.

One side result which was not forthcoming was U.S. publicity which would help in public education on the SWA issue. Also, public recognition of the project at the U.N. was almost non-existent in the rush of adjournment.

There was no expectation of changing the position of the South African government. It is assumed, however, that the position of the South African government will not change except under continuous pressure.

Specific accomplishments of the project were:

- 1) This was the first attempt to implement the U.N. resolution removing the jurisdiction of SWA from South Africa. That U.N. resolution was dramatized.
- 2) The South African rejection of the U.N. decision on SWA was dramatized in an unmistakable way.
- 3) Both government officials and ordinary citizens of South Africa and SWA were reminded that the world has not forgotten their injustices, and that some are willing to act for justice. The project got thorough news coverage in South Africa and in SWA. (Although newsmen waiting for us at the Windhoek Airport were warned not to take pictures of us if we did land, or their cameras would be confiscated.) The Rand Daily Mail in Johannesburg gave the story a headline two and a half inches high, half-way across the top of the front page. Most papers gave extensive coverage.
- 4) The project was a morale booster for SWA political refugees and for those struggling within SWA for justice.

5) The project gave the group an opportunity to express to U.S. officials in Zambia and in Washington our dissatisfaction with the lack of vigor in the U.S. position on the problems of Southern Africa. This included an hour with the Undersecretary of State for African Affairs and others of his staff. Concern was demonstrated and recognized.

6) A similar right was earned at the U.N., where we have submitted a full report and may testify. A good many U.N. delegates have expressed their appreciation for this project.

7) Independent African countries, and particularly Zambia, were shown that there are Americans on their side of the Southern African problems. This was done in a context where American relationships have their ups and downs, but are gradually deteriorating. This accomplishment is best illustrated by quoting, in part, an editorial entitled "Facing Reality over SWA," which appeared in the TIMES OF ZAMBIA on December 8:

"The gallant band of Americans who set the record straight on just who controls the voiceless people of South West Africa deserve the praise and thanks of every Pan-Africanist.

"Gathered from a variety of social service and humane organizations, these citizens of the United States also demonstrated to their government the difference between paying lip-service to the ideals of African nationalism and actually doing something about it.

"The confrontation of the racists of South Africa, a dramatic occurrence a mile high over South West Africa, has reminded us that the original American dream of social justice for all is not entirely dead--despite the expediencies and cynicisms of present-day Washington.

"It remains to be seen whether their refreshing vigor of approach will stimulate meaningful action in that tired old debating chamber, the United Nations..."

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Note: This is a personal report not cleared with the Committee for the Development of Independent South West Africa. It is distributed as an educational effort in exploring the use of nonviolent direct action in international affairs. If you have questions about the report or project, or wish additional copies of this report (free, in limited quantities), write to me at Taylor's Lane, Riverton, New Jersey, 08077.

Lyle Tatum  
22 January 1968