

American Supporters of the Defiance Campaign

Presentation to the United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid

by George M. Houser

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I was very pleased to receive the invitation to make statement to the Special Committee against Apartheid on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the Defiance Campaign against Unjust Laws of South Africa, sponsored by the African National Congress. This Campaign was a very important development in the struggle against apartheid and white domination in South Africa. But it had a great significance to me personally in spite of the fact that I was removed from the scene of the struggle by thousands of miles. It was through this Campaign that I became involved in support of the liberation struggle in Africa, a development quite unexpected, which was to be a dominating factor in my life for years to come. So, what I would like to do in this statement is to make a personalized narrative of the effect of the Defiance Campaign in South Africa seen from many miles away, as well as to indicate its effect on the lives of some of us in the United States.

I first heard about plans for the Defiance Campaign when a long-time friend of mine, Bill Sutherland, returned from a trip to London in early 1952 with the news that a non-violent civil disobedience campaign against racist laws was to take place in South Africa soon. As believers in non-violence and as staunch and active opponents of racism, we felt we should do something to support the campaign. We contacted the ANC in Johannesburg and I opened up a correspondence in early 1952 which grew steadily over the next several months. The Joint Secretaries of the Campaign were Walter M. Sisulu, the Secretary General of the African National Congress, and Yusuf A. Cachalia, Secretary-General of the South African Indian Congress. I wrote to them on CORE letterhead and Sisulu replied on 26 March: "Your letter of the 17th of March has been a source of great inspiration to me. I am very delighted to learn that your organization (CORE) has taken such a great interest in the struggle for fundamental human rights by my organization."

Up to this time I had very rudimentary knowledge about South Africa. My organizational experience was in the United States working with the peace and civil rights movements. I knew something about the brand of racist laws called apartheid, and about Gandhi's non-violent campaigns at the turn of the century. I, of course, had read Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*. So, I had to learn a great deal about South Africa quite rapidly.

Through correspondence with Sisulu and Cachalia and by reading the memoranda which began coming to me from the movement in South Africa, I saw the plan for the Campaign develop. The first joint meeting to lay the foundation for the effort took place on July 29, 1951, at the invitation of the ANC. At that time the organizations involved committed themselves to "declare war" on apartheid laws such as the pass laws, the Group Areas Act, the Separate Representation of Voters Act, the Suppression of Communism Act, the Bantu Authorities Act. Cachalia wrote me that in January 1952 the ANC had written to Prime Minister Malan demanding the repeal of certain apartheid

laws, failing which mass action against racist laws would begin. Malan responded with the threat that “the government will make full use of the machinery at its disposal to quell any disturbances.” In the same communication the Prime Minister made the statement, often quoted since, which reflects the essence of the white supremacist position: “It is self-contradictory to claim as the inherent right of the Bantu, who differ in many ways from Europeans, that they should be regarded as not different, especially when it is borne in mind that these differences are permanent and not man-made.”

The kickoff for the campaign was originally scheduled for April 6, 1952, Van Riebeeck Day, the 300th anniversary of the coming of the white man to South Africa. It also happened to be Palm Sunday. The European community planned large demonstrations and celebrations for the occasion. It was a natural for black opposition demonstrations. But the Joint Action Committee apparently did not feel quite ready for the inauguration of the full effort. Sisulu wrote to me that “on the 6th of April we shall only have meetings and demonstrations and a pledge shall be taken. Thereafter the Executive will fix the date for the Defiance of Unjust Laws.” Sisulu also said, “We need money for propaganda, to assist some of the needy families, those people who are going to court and imprisonment.”

We in New York were deeply impressed by the plan to keep the campaign nonviolent. Sisulu had written me in late March 1952 that he had just returned from a tour of Natal, the Orange Free State, Zululand, and the Transvaal and was satisfied with the response of the people. “We have made emphasis on a nonviolent approach; having judged my people from the strike of 1950, they will certainly behave well.”

In the meantime I had begun a correspondence with Professor Z.K. Matthews, the President of the Cape Province branch of the ANC and the head of African Studies at the only university-level school for Africans in South Africa, the University College of Fort Hare. In the near future he was to come again to New York as a visiting professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York where I became well acquainted with him. Referring to the tactic of nonviolence in the campaign he said: “We take great comfort from the fact that Gandhism was born on South African soil. Through these same means India was able to achieve a tremendous upsurge of consciousness of destiny among the people of India.”

At about this time I began a correspondence also with Manilal Gandhi. He was one of the sons of Mahatma Gandhi and he made his home at the Phoenix Settlement that his father had started in Natal fifty years or so earlier. Manilal was still editing the publication, *Indian Opinion*, also started by his father. I began the correspondence with Gandhi in early 1952. He wrote me in March saying that he was a “bit doubtful to what extent our struggle is going to remain nonviolent.”

At the time he wrote this letter, Manilal Gandhi had already started a 21-day fast which he began on 7 March. But he advised us that we “should certainly give our sympathy and moral support to the cause and watch how things go.”

In New York we felt we had enough information about the campaign to make a decision on what we ought to do. We decided to set up an ad hoc support group for the campaign and adopted the name Americans for South African Resistance (AFSAR).

Our task, as we conceived it, was to be a vehicle for information about the Campaign and to raise funds. The National Action Committee in South Africa was calling for one million shillings by the end of March. We decided we would do what we could, but over a longer period of time, for we had no funds and were just getting organized. Our first public activity was a mass meeting planned for 6 April in solidarity with the ANC and the SAIC of South Africa. While the white South Africans, particularly the Afrikaners, had their solemn celebrations commemorating the coming of the Dutch in 1652, and the blacks had their mass protest gatherings in major centers of South Africa, we launched our own effort in New York. Through mailings and the mass distribution of throw-away leaflets we called on people to join us on 6 April “to support the drive against Jim Crow in South Africa.” “Use Palm Sunday to help Africans get freedom”, another leaflet was headlined. “Show the world we oppose Jim Crow abroad as well as at home”. Not surprisingly, our language was in the American idiom.

About 800 people attended our meeting held at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem where Adam Clayton Powell was minister. Speakers were Powell, Canada Lee who had starred in the movie version of “Cry, the Beloved Country”, Vithal Babu, Secretary of the Indian Congress Parliamentary Party in New Delhi, who was briefly in New York, and Donald Harrington, minister of the Community Church. The resolution of support for the South African Campaign, passed by acclamation at the meeting, was sent to the Joint Action Committee in South Africa, Prime Minister Nehru in India, Manilal Gandhi, President Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson. With our note to Walter Sisulu we sent our first check of \$300 collected at the meeting to support the campaign.

The meeting was followed by a motorcade of cars with protest banners floating alongside from Harlem down to the South African Consulate at 65th and Madison. The motorcade was impressive and covered many blocks. I had written to the South African Consul-General asking for a discussion with him on behalf of Americans for South African Resistance even though it was a Sunday afternoon. He responded diplomatically that such a meeting would serve no useful purpose. He put us off by saying that if we wanted more information, not he, but the South African Information Office was the place for us to go.

My correspondence with key leaders in the Defiance Campaign, plus our April 6th demonstration in New York, helped to establish us as serious supporters of the effort.

On 18 June, only a few days before the campaign of civil disobedience was to begin, Sisulu wrote me asking specific help. He said that they were having increasing difficulty in using normal channels for dissemination of news of the movement. He then said: “In addressing this letter to you, we are considering whether we could not enlist your valuable support in assisting us in publicizing our statements, bulletins, photographs and other propaganda material....You will realize in this way you will at the same time save us a large amount of financial expenditure which is naturally difficult for us to outlay”.

We were honored to be accepted in this collaborative manner and eagerly took on the responsibility. I was informed by Cachalia that Professor Z.K. Matthews was coming to New York with a letter of introduction to me and that he would be our best source of information about the unfolding campaign.

The civil disobedience began on 26 June. A group of 52 were arrested at the Boksburg "Native" Location, 20 miles from Johannesburg. Led by Nana Sita, the president of the Transvaal Indian Congress, they had broken the law by trying to enter the Location without a pass giving them permission. A second group were arrested in Johannesburg at 11.30 p.m. for defying the curfew regulations. This was led by Flag Boshielo of the ANC who said to the police: "We are nonviolent fighters for freedom. We are going to defy regulations that have kept our fathers in bondage." I received Bulletin 2 of the National Action Committee for the Defiance Campaign soon afterward and it reported that volunteers in the campaign broke apartheid laws in six different centers in the Union. The organized acts of defiance were preceded by great mass meetings. There were mass prayer meetings in Port Elizabeth, Durban, Johannesburg (in the Orlando Township) and in Cape Town.

Both Sisulu and Cachalia were arrested on 26 June. Nelson Mandela, who was the Volunteer-in-Chief for the campaign and the president of the ANC Youth League, was arrested the evening of 26 June. Other leaders of the ANC and SAIC were arrested within a few days, including Dr. Dadoo, president of the Indian Congress, Moses Kotane of the National Executive of the ANC, and J.B. Marks, president of the African Mineworkers' Union.

The trial of the group arrested at Boksburg did not come up for nearly four weeks and they were held in jail. They all pled guilty for not producing passes and were given seven days in jail or one pound fine. The magistrate said he was taking into account the time they already spent behind bars in sentencing them. Only one paid the fine. At the time of the trial the court and the yard outside were filled with African and Indian spectators and demonstrators, most of them wearing the black, yellow and green armbands of the ANC and giving the thumbs-up Congress salute. As the trial ended the crowd left singing "Mayibuye Afrika" (God Bless Africa).

Dadoo, Kotane, and Marks were given four to six months in jail under the Suppression of Communism Act. In their case the magistrate said: "It is common knowledge that one of the aims of communism is to break down race barriers and strive for equal rights for all sections of the people and to do so without any discrimination of race, colour or creed... The Union of South Africa, with its peculiar problems created by a population overwhelmingly non-European, is fertile ground for the dissemination of communist propaganda. This would endanger the survival of Europeans. Therefore legislation must be pursued with the object of suppressing communism." It was this kind of mentality that made us discount the charge of communist influence in the movement. Opposition to apartheid and the support of communism were made synonymous. By this definition we were all communists.

Our sources of information about the Campaign were several - the bulletins arriving from South Africa, continued correspondence, some press reports in American papers such as the New York Times, but most important was Prof. Z. K. Matthews. He arrived in New York in late June 1952 to take up his position as the Henry Luce Visiting Professor of World Christianity at Union Theological Seminary, a post which was to continue for one year. I made contact very soon with Matthews and we saw each other frequently. He shared the stream of information coming to him from South Africa, most important of which were communications from his son Joe. Joe was a young lawyer with an office in Port Elizabeth, one of the most active centers of the Campaign. He was also one of the

leaders of both the Youth League and the ANC. So the information we received was from the inside. With this kind of data we began to issue bulletins at least once a month about the progress of the Campaign. The information coming from Matthews was treated anonymously. We put out 18 or 20 AFSAR Bulletins in the 1952-53 year, and our mailing list grew modestly but steadily.

One of the letters from Joe Matthews to his father in early September reported that in Grahamstown in the Cape Province the people forced the City Council to close down the beer hall in the African location. He wrote: "For days the people stood in front of the beer hall praying and singing the African National Anthem until the place was shut up. It was built at a cost of £8000 and brought the Municipal Council a revenue of £240 a week. That is one of the good by-products of the campaign: it has dealt a death blow to hooliganism and drunkenness...."

This same communication reported that the biggest demonstration of the Campaign took place on 26 August in Johannesburg against the arrest of ANC leaders. The courts were jammed with 2000 people inside the building and thousands more gathered in the open square outside at a rally which lasted until dark." An unprecedented event took place when the court adjourned for fifteen minutes to allow Dr. Moroka (President of ANC and himself on trial), at the request of the prosecutor, to address the people. Amid shouts of "Afrika", Dr Moroka stood on a chair and asked the people to leave the building quietly so that the case could continue. They left immediately in perfect silence.

Subsequently Dr. Moroka and 19 others were found guilty under the Suppression of Communism Act and were sentenced to 9 months in prison at compulsory labour, suspended for 2 years.

I received a letter from Sisulu written on 16 September urging us to do what we could to send funds. "We need plenty of funds as you can see" he wrote. "Our budget is becoming bigger every month". We were greatly limited in what we could do. We were certainly not professional fund raisers. I suppose our mailing list was something less than 1000. There was a growing edge to American interest in South Africa and in the Campaign, but among a pretty select group. Nevertheless some established groups, such as local and national church bodies, put the issue on their agendas. In Boston a local group calling itself Bostonians Allied for South African Resistance (BAFSAR) voluntarily affiliated with us. They sponsored public meetings, carried and promoted literature, mostly supplied by our New York office, and raised some funds. At one time in early 1953 we received about \$700 for the campaign through the efforts of this group.

We probably did not send as much as \$5000 to South Africa for the duration of the Campaign. Much of it was sent through Z. K. Matthews. But there was a sense of excitement about the support we received. Contributions came from all parts of the US, including Hawaii, from Canada and India. A woman in Arizona sent us her diamond ring saying she could not conscientiously wear it knowing that it represented slave labour. We sold it and sent the proceeds to South Africa. A family in Ohio contributed \$100 at Christmastime and said it represented funds they had saved for family gifts. A group at a theological seminary sent funds saved by eating sacrificial meals, and a person who refused to pay federal tax for military purposes sent \$100 saved in this way. Thus we began to get some following around the country.

In 1952 the General Assembly of the United Nations began its session in October. Spurred by the Defiance Campaign, India took the lead in calling for an agenda item which for the first time would deal with the whole racial conflict in South Africa. Up to that time the only items related to South Africa dealt with the treatment of people of Indian and Pakistani origin and the question of Namibia, then called South West Africa. A cross-section of Asian countries supported India's lead. The item was assigned to the Ad Hoc Political Committee whose chairman was Ambassador Alexis Kyrou of Greece. Asian and African delegates were interested in having Z.K. Matthews give expert testimony to the Committee relevant to its consideration of the issue. No one could have spoken with greater authority. Today, hearing expert testimony before the appropriate committee of the U.N. is accepted procedure, but in 1952, when the U.N. was looked upon as something of a Western club, it was not. AFSAR helped organize a letter-writing campaign to the U.N. and the U.S. Mission to the U.N. seeking approval for Matthews' appearance. Among the distinguished Americans who wrote on behalf of Matthews was Harry Emerson Fosdick, minister of the prestigious Riverside Church in New York, who wrote to Ambassador Kyrou and Henry Cabot Lodge at the U.S. Mission to the U.N. A reply came from Charles E. Allen, Director of the Office of Public Affairs at the U.S. Mission, explaining diplomatically that to allow petitioners to appear before the U.N. "would involve radical changes in the structures and procedures of the U.N." The function of the U.N., Fosdick was told, was to reconcile judgments and policies of governments, not to function as fact-finding agencies. The U.S. made clear it would vote against Matthews' appearance.

I recall a visit to Matthews' apartment in McGiffert Hall of Union Seminary at about this time. As I entered the apartment, two gentlemen were just leaving. After they departed, Z. K. Matthews said, "Do you know who those men are?" I didn't, so he explained, "They were from the U.S. State Department and came here to urge me not to insist on speaking at the U.N. If I did the U.S. would have to vote against me." The U.N., dominated at that time by the U.S., did not approve Matthews' request.

A crisis arose for the Defiance Campaign in October and November of 1952 when riots broke out, centered in the Eastern Cape Province, especially in Port Elizabeth and East London. We had word from a number of sources, including Manilal Gandhi and Quintin Whyte, the Director of the South African Institute of Race Relations, that the riots were quite separate from the Campaign although the government tried to associate them.

The information which came through Z.K. Matthews was that in East London Africans had been given permission to hold an open air religious service in the African location. The preacher was reading about the oppression of the Israelites from the Bible to about 200 people. Two vehicles loaded with armed police drove up. The policeman in charge ordered the crowd to disperse within five minutes. The meeting immediately broke up, but in less than two minutes the police ordered a baton charge. Before the crowd could get out of the square, shots were fired and a man was killed. The police then drove in their vehicles through the streets of the Location, firing at random. One man was killed while sitting in his kitchen reading a newspaper. The rioting started after this, first with stone throwing and later with setting fire to buildings. Altogether 13 people were killed and at least 50 injured.

The net result from the riots was that the government cracked down on all organized protests. Quintin Whyte wrote, "While we must distinguish between the Campaign and

the riots, nevertheless the state of tension is very high. There has been a marked hardening against liberals in the country.”

Whyte’s letter to me of November 14, 1952, was an important assessment of the Campaign. He said the Campaign “is training heroes and martyrs as well as leaders for future work.” He spoke of the “remarkable self-control of the resisters.” In a summary sentence he said the effect of the campaign is “to unite non-Europeans to give expression to African nationalism; to train for the future; to demonstrate the power of Africans; to make Europeans question themselves; to make the government more adamant; to make liberal Europeans more unpopular; and in the long run to gain concessions.”

The discipline of the volunteers in the Campaign began to win new adherents and to gain the sympathy of some who had been skeptical about the degree to which nonviolence would be followed.

On 8 December, international publicity was given to the arrest of Patrick Duncan and Manilal Gandhi as part of a group that violated the law by going into the Germiston Location near Johannesburg without passes. Duncan was the first white man to be arrested. He attracted special attention because he was the son of a former Governor General of South Africa. Further, he was on crutches at the time of his arrest as a result of a motor accident.

Duncan was sentenced to 100 days in jail or \$280 fine. Gandhi was given a 50 day sentence or \$140 fine. Both chose to serve the sentences.

Up to December 16, 1952, the total number arrested in the Campaign was 8057, of which 5719 were in the Eastern Cape, 423 in Western Cape, 1411 in Transvaal, 246 in Natal and 258 in the Orange Free State.

The government was bound to respond to the growing impact of the Campaign with severe measures, and it did so toward the end of 1952. It passed the Public Safety Act and the Criminal Laws amendment Act. Dr. R. T. Bokwe, the brother-in-law of Z.K. Matthews, wrote to me on 30 December saying that no meetings of more than ten people were allowed in African locations or reserves. Practically all African leaders, including himself, had been served letters from the Minister of Justice forbidding them from attending gatherings. He told me that he could not even attend a church service.

A so-called “Whipping Post Law” was passed under which anyone who received funds for any organized resistance to laws of the Union was punishable by five years imprisonment, £500 fine, and 15 lashes with the cane.

With these developments we in New York were hesitant to send more funds. I wrote to Dr. Bokwe, who had been recipient of a good portion of the several thousand dollars we sent to South Africa: “We have not wanted to send any further money until we knew whether you or any others might be placed in jeopardy. Do you have any advice for us in this regard?” Previous letters from Bokwe had informed us that our donations had, in some cases, paid fines for resisters who had become ill in jail, and had helped families whose breadwinners were out of circulation for a period of time. The fact is that after the government passed this new legislation, the Defiance Campaign came to a halt and the work of AFSAR had to change. We wrote to our supporters in our bulletin of April 14,

1953, that we had not sent any funds recently “because we are awaiting clarification of the ‘Whipping Post Law.’” Bokwe wrote me on March 22, 1953, saying he had received our contribution of 13 February and then added: “We have good reason to believe that mail is subjected to scrutiny. One is thus unable to write you as freely as one should have liked to.”

By this time I had developed a keen interest in South Africa and felt involved. I was more than casually interested in the election of Chief Albert J. Luthuli to the presidency of the ANC at their December 1952 Congress, replacing Dr. Moroka. I opened up a correspondence with Luthuli. I found out that until November 11, 1952, he had been Chief of the Groutville Mission Reserve for seventeen years, having been elected to the post by the people. He was told by the South African Government that he would have to choose between his chieftancy and his work with the ANC. He unhesitatingly chose the ANC. The government deposed him.

Activities of AFSAR apparently attracted some attention in South African government circles. Arthur Blaxall sent me a clipping from a newspaper in South Africa in which Eric Louw, then Minister of Economic Affairs, later Foreign Minister, called attention to support which AFSAR was giving to the Campaign and to the relief of those arrested.

On April 15, 1953, elections (for whites) were held in South Africa, the first since the Nationalists came to power in 1948. They strengthened their hold on the government by increasing their majority in parliament. Apartheid was extended also. The Population Registration Act was passed, requiring all people in South Africa to register with the government by race. Plans were laid for eliminating Sophiatown, an area of the city where Africans could own land, and creating the area now called Soweto.

The Defiance Campaign came to an end. We in AFSAR had a series of meetings to decide whether we should disband, set up a more permanent organization dealing with South Africa or establish something even broader. We decided on the third course. Thus AFSAR was transformed into an organization which would relate to the whole anti-colonial struggle in Africa. The name chosen for this new entity was the American Committee on Africa.