In Search of South African Analogies

1. The World’s Last Colony?
South Africa is not a colonial society. It was given effective self-government by Britain in 1910, and obtained the same sovereign status as Canada, Australia and New Zealand in 1933, with the advent of Dominion status. Any doubt about the real autonomy of South Africa in relation to Britain should have been dispelled by the fierce debate which surrounded South Africa’s decision in 1939 to enter the Second World War on Britain’s side. In 1961 the last affiliation with Britain was severed when South Africa became a republic outside the Commonwealth.

These details of constitutional status are important because of what they indicate about the nature of power in South African society. Power is held by a segment of the indigenous population. The task facing those who seek fundamental change in the present government does not lie in persuading a colonial authority that the costs of continued occupation outweigh the benefits, but rather in helping one section of a population wrest power, by force or persuasion, from another. This is a much more difficult exercise.


2. Algeria Revisited?
Alistair Horne’s A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962 enjoys wide readership and seems to evoke feelings both of déjà vu and of foreboding amongst South African readers. . . . Algeria, of all colonial analogies, is compelling in the similarity between its ratio of settlers to indigenous populations (one to eight in Algeria’s case), the “depth” of settler society, and especially in the potential costs of change through armed struggle (where estimates of fatalities vary from one to four million, with a further one million resettled to metropolitan France). . . .

However, the predictive quality of this analogy is seriously impaired by one critical difference. Charles de Gaulle lived in Paris, not Algiers. This fact, above all others, renders the speculation of the so called “De Gaulle option” fanciful. It requires one kind of calculus to persuade a leader and a government to surrender even a much-treasured colony, and quite another for the abdication of power in one’s own territory.

— Berger and Godsell, op. cit.
3. Iran, Haiti, the Philippines?
The South African state is fundamentally different from the type of state overthrown in Iran, Haiti, and the Philippines. Those states were authoritarian regimes that were led by one man, often with the major goal of enriching the ruler and his relations. In contrast, the South African state is an institutionalized system of repression that is dedicated to preserving the political and economic superiority of an entire racial group. This distinction is important because in an authoritarian regime the leader (be he the shah, Jean-Claude Duvalier, or Ferdinand Marcos) is the glue that holds the whole regime together. When the paramount leader falls, the entire regime, regardless of the strength of the repressive apparatus, dissipates, leading to an unexpectedly early and easy victory for the rebelling forces.


4. Israel?
If you changed the names, the description of what is happening in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank would be a description of what is happening in South Africa.

— Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as quoted by Peter Steinfels in The New York Times, February 4, 1989

Israel is almost willfully transforming itself into the South Africa of the Middle East. And without even South Africa's justification. White South Africans can at least make the mathematical argument that to grant citizenship rights to the country's black majority is to threaten the ruling white minority. Israelis, who vastly outnumber the Palestinians, can make such an argument only by deliberately blurring the distinction between Arabs generally and Palestinians in particular.

South Africa, aware of the power of television to render hopelessness graphically, has tried to silence the outraged world by shutting off the TV cameras. Israel tries to accomplish the same thing by closing its ears to outside protest.

Neither tactic can work. The time is past due for both countries to enter into negotiations with the accepted representatives of its disfranchised citizens.


5. Burundi?
Whenever human beings are mistreated, decent people have a duty to protest, and South African whites deserve such protestation. But hold on. [In 1988], the Tutsi tribesmen in Burundi went on another genocidal rampage and in the space of several days slaughtered an estimated 5,000 to 20,000 members of the Hutu tribe. . . . This is slaughter of major proportions, and I bet most Americans never even heard about it. But, you can bet the rent money that had South African whites beaten and arrested 10 blacks, on the same day the Tutsis were slaughtering thousands of Hutus, the lead story on the six o'clock news would have been the South African arrests. There would have been . . . renewed calls for stronger U.S. sanctions and liberal politicians would have gotten a good "sound bite" repeating their calls for South Africa to be declared a terrorist state. . . .

Why does the anti-apartheid lobby become unglued when South African whites mistreat blacks yet show no interest when blacks commit heinous, barbaric acts?

The only answer I can offer is that they consider whites civilized and blacks uncivilized. Therefore, even mildly barbaric behavior by whites is unacceptable while wholesale slaughter by blacks is acceptable—and expected. Please tell me this isn't the answer.

— Walter Williams, in The Washington Times, November 25, 1988

6. White Voters’ Options?
White voters yearn for an alternative [that meets their legitimate fears and aspirations]. They flock to hear Leon Louw and Frances Kendall talk about cantons, and they pore over Dennis Beckett's theories about leaders. They have made of Clem Sunter a phenomenon as they search desperately for an answer to one question: what will happen after apartheid?

Many, looking north, abandon all hope and emigrate to Australasia or North America or Europe. They listen to the tales of Zimbabwe, and think of Zambia, of which such tales were once told, and leave Africa. Hardly anybody emigrates to Botswana, Africa's model democracy. . . .

Almost two decades ago, a Nicaraguan told me that wealthy families sent their daughters on long trips abroad; hoping they would marry foreign passports; today, South Africans do so. . . .
What the anti-apartheid white electorate needs—is almost begging for—is a vision of a tolerable future. That vision cannot come from socialists, obsessed as they are with class vengeance and with bureaucratic control; it cannot come from the Nationalists, obsessed as they are with balancing groups against each other; and it cannot come from the neoleonovists whose extreme economic libertarianism lets the Devil take the hindmost.

Only the liberals have a credible vision of a secure future, if only they could convey it to the electorate in terms which the voters find credible. Instead, the voters are subjected to a steady stream of threats, warnings, denunciations and moralizing sermons that serve to heighten their anxiety.

So the Nationalists will win again [in the September 1989 elections], for it is on the question of security before and after liberation, and no other question, that they still win elections.

—Ken Owen, editor of Business Day (Johannesburg), in his column of May 8, 1989

7. De Klerk/Jan Smuts?

Much hangs on the outcome of [F.W. de Klerk’s] four-nation European tour [this month.] It...offers an internationally inexperienced Mr. de Klerk the chance to make personal contacts...and, if all goes well, to become, in effect, the first “respectable” Afrikaner leader since Field Marshal Jan Smuts.

Marshal Smuts, who fought the British as a Boer war commander, later became a trusted wartime confidant of Winston Churchill. In 1948, however, he and his United Party were defeated at elections which brought Mr. de Klerk’s National Party to power on an apartheid ticket which led to decades of international opprobrium....The lesson learnt the hard way by Marshal Smuts in the 1948 election...was that a vaguely “reformist” party supported by a volatile mix of Afrikaners and English speakers, as the NP now is, tends to be a fragile alliance at best, vulnerable to attack from the “conservative” right, and inadequate as a power base from which to embark on the fundamental changes to the balance of power and system of government which is on the horizon...


8. The Angola-Namibia Negotiations?

When South Africa’s President-in-waiting, Mr. F.W. de Klerk, takes tea in Downing Street this week he will be aware that the invitation would not have been extended had he already succeeded Mr. P.W. Botha to the Presidency. Such is the isolation he will inherit.

Nevertheless, the fact that Mrs. Thatcher, Chancellor Kohl, and possibly President Bush, are anxious to take the measure of South Africa’s next leader reflects their hope that Pretoria at last may be ready to move away from the sterile politics of the past and negotiate a common future with South Africa’s black majority. That hope owes much to the Angola-Namibia settlement as an example of what negotiation can achieve....

After 11 years of Mr. P.W. Botha’s rule, mass black urbanization, the demands of the economy, simple demography and the explosive growth of black skills, entrepreneurship and consumption have created a reality which can no longer be ordered or controlled by the stale political nostrums of the past....

When Mr. de Klerk assumes power after the general election on September 6, however, he will start with a few advantages, not the least of which is a relatively clean slate. Unlike his predecessor, he is too young to have played any major part in the creation of the apartheid state. Neither will he be burdened by too much dead wood in his party or his cabinet as, tired and discredited, many of the old guard have elected to follow Mr. Botha into retirement....

[Spurred on by the example of Namibia, Mrs. Thatcher has used the interregnum in Pretoria to persuade the sanctioneers that more can be achieved by talking to South Africa than by its isolation. But, as she will doubtless tell her South African visitor this week, the opportunity to prove her right will not last long. If by next spring her strategy is seen to fail, if Mr. de Klerk is still relying on words rather than deeds to buy time, he will find his credit has run out....

—Editorial in The Times (London), June 19, 1989

9. President Nixon?

White South Africa may have found its Richard Nixon in F.W. de Klerk. With the selection...of Mr. de Klerk as head of the ruling National Party, white South Africa may at last be poised to break the deadlock in white-black relations. Just as President Nixon was able to go to China, so Mr. de Klerk could be the leader to go, metaphorically, to Soweto or Lusaka....

He will be well placed...to preside over the final dismantling of political apartheid. The quality and mettle of South Africa’s white leadership becomes more crucial with each passing month. There is a new readiness in large sectors of the Afrikaner business, clerical, press and even political leadership to release Nelson Mandela and bargain meaningfully with blacks....

President Nixon long opposed negotiating with Red China. Only a leader with impeccable conservative credentials could have changed course and have been credited with statesmanship. So Mr. de Klerk may also possess authentic ingredients of such statesmanship in South Africa.


10. U.S. and Belgian Models?

[The NP is not as ideologically obsessed with the group concept as has been suggested by many critics. Our strong emphasis on group rights, alongside individual rights, is based on the reality of South Africa and not on an ideological obsession or racial prejudice. There is no such thing as a nonracial society in a multiracial country. However closely we may cooperate, South Africa will...
retain its diversity, and that diversity will remain a powerful and often beneficial force which must be reckoned with. . . .

But, as America has to recognize and accommodate its diversity through a black caucus, special arrangements for Indian reservations and affirmative action programs, South Africa will have to continue to accommodate its diversity—cultural and racial—in its future planning.

As Belgium is forced to make special arrangements for group security as a basis for cooperation, we will have to do likewise.

Reality dictates recognition of group diversity. How we do it, so as to ensure it will not be on a discriminatory basis, is our challenge. . . .

—F.W. de Klerk, quoted in Business Day (Johannesburg), February 8, 1989

11. Panama?
We have been informed by various groups and organizations of the disastrous effects of the U.S. sanctions against Panama. These sanctions have led to the destruction of the country's economy, caused immense suffering on the poorest of the poor, increased unemployment, and aggravated social problems. . . . The U.S. policy has failed, and their continued imposition helps the government to direct attention from the real, serious internal economic and political crisis. We call upon the U.S. government, therefore, to immediately end the sanctions placed on Panama, so that the unjust suffering can be alleviated and so that the overwhelming domestic problems can be brought to light and addressed by the people of Panama, as a sovereign independent nation, without external oppression and interference.

—From a March 20, 1989 statement issued by Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa and three other Anglican/Episcopalian archbishops (from Canada, the United States, and the West Indies) following a visit to Panama

It is well known that we believe that, short of taking up arms, the application of various forms of economic and diplomatic pressure is the only way in which those outside South Africa can force that government to sit down and talk to our people. At present, there is a new emphasis on the ways in which financial sanctions in particular could achieve that aim. We are monitoring the exploration of that option closely. However, the methods which you use to put pressure on the South African Government are secondary to the main issue, which is to get it to the negotiating table. If it can be done without sanctions, so much the better. Nevertheless, we reiterate that we remain totally convinced that the South African Government will not be brought to the negotiating table without pressure and therefore that the time is not appropriate to lift the campaign to exert such pressure.

—From a statement issued by Archbishop Tutu, Dr. Allan Boesak, Reverend Frank Chikane, and Dr. C.F. Beyers Naude on the occasion of their May 1989 visit to Washington

12. Camp David?
The new Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman J. Cohen, believes there is "new thinking on both sides" of the white-black deadlock in South Africa. He sees a chance for a process of real political change to begin, and he thinks the United States can effectively encourage it.

Hank Cohen, as everyone calls him, is a Foreign Service professional who first served in Africa 25 years ago. He is above all a realist. How, then, does he see a possibility that South African whites will relinquish any part of the power that they have so tenaciously held? . . .

How can the United States be effective in South Africa? I asked Mr. Cohen.

"We're not really players in the sense of, say, Camp David, where we played such a central role," he said.

"But we do have economic interests, and they care about us. So we say to them, 'We're ready to normalize with you provided we can see an end game.' Not a detailed solution but the statement of a goal, like 'non-racial representative government.'

"And we ask, 'How long will it take to get from A to B?' It must involve a negotiating process. That is a change from the last Administration, which spoke of the need for negotiations. Now we want to have an idea of the ending."

Was he hopeful about Mr. de Klerk, who is expected to succeed P.W. Botha as President after the forthcoming election?

"We see hope in the fact that he is pragmatic," Mr. Cohen said. "I don't like a guy who promises the moon. I like a guy who tells the other side, 'We're not going to commit suicide.'

"I think he will stop the practice of writing new constitutions and presenting them to the blacks, take it or leave it. I think there is understanding that there has to be negotiation.

"In the same way I think the A.N.C. now sees that change has to come in a process of negotiation, not just a handover of power. And it has to be a negotiation with no losers, as it was on Namibia and Angola.

"So what we do is ask the Government, 'How can we help?' And we say to the A.N.C., 'Are you willing to have an end game in which there are no losers?' We see our role as talking to both sides and trying to nudge them."