South Africa:
An Unconventional Republican View

by Philip L. Christenson

Those who argued back in the early 1960s that an end to whites-only government in South Africa would not come until the end of the century were dismissed as hopelessly conservative and even at times “racist.” The winds of change were said to be irresistible, immediate, and at gale force. Twenty-five years later, we may now be beginning to see the beginning of the end of 300 years of white-controlled government. It is my personal conviction that the president of the United States who takes office in January 1989, if he should serve two full four-year terms, may well be the first to welcome a democratically elected South African head-of-state to the Oval Office.

January 20, 1997 is almost a decade from now and less than three years from the end of the twentieth century. If mankind can put a man on the moon with a decade’s commitment, it is not impossible that the South Africa of 1997 will be a country in which democracy has been established, human rights of all citizens and groups are respected, racial harmony is the rule rather than the exception, and concerted efforts are being made to develop the full potential of all men and women.

It is also not impossible that South Africa, on that date, will be a country in which the children of today’s South Africans, black and white, will be locked in a brutal and bloody civil war that could cost as many lives as the approximately 1 million killed in Algeria between 1954 and 1962, and decimate Africa’s most advanced economy.

Americans who genuinely care and wish to see this beautiful country and its 33 million inhabitants reach their full potential and destiny must recognize, however, that it is South Africans who will make the choices that lead to one of these destinies, or any other. We Americans can only contribute to the atmosphere in which South Africans make those decisions.

If this contribution is to be meaningful, and not merely benign neglect, we need policies, and more importantly practices, that will combine a very active commitment to working to end apartheid with measured restraint in the face of pressure to usurp the right of black South Africans to evolve their own leaders and of all South Africans to participate in formulating the ultimate political structures of the postapartheid era.
In fashioning a policy that will contribute to creating an environment in which South Africa can move with minimal bloodshed toward democracy, U.S. policymakers need to accept several realities. One is that U.S.-South African relations are entering their most crucial years. Another reality is that economic sanctions cannot serve as the principal building block of a sustainable and responsible policy.

Sanctions in Context
The Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986, enacted by Congress despite a presidential veto, was the product of a genuine concern about apartheid (“We have to be seen to be doing something and no one has a better idea”), but some of the specific sanctions were self-serving. With all due respect, it is peculiar that all 47 Democratic members of the Senate voted to express their moral outrage at apartheid and their desire to see an end to violence in South Africa by supporting an amendment banning the importation of fluorospar. Although the amendment was officially offered by Senator Robert Byrd, the Minority Leader at that time, the principal proponent of the ban on fluorospar was a senator whose home state is the site of the United States’ only fluorospar mine. (The question most frequently asked of staff about this amendment was “What the hell is fluorospar?”)

The official record of the 1986 Senate debates on the South Africa legislation documents a remarkable effort by the Republican leadership (headed by Senator Richard Lugar, then chairman of the Foreign Relations committee) to focus on genuine antiapartheid measures and to screen out those primarily motivated by domestic protectionism. Although many protectionist anomalies (including the fluorospar ban) were weeded out of the final legislation, a solid 47-member Democratic bloc in combination with some Republican senators succeeded in passing several import sanctions reflecting constituency interests. The 1986 Anti-Apartheid Act bans the importation of all products from South Africa that compete with troubled U.S. industries such as iron and steel, coal, agriculture, apparel, and textiles.

Now that a first round of economic sanctions of limited effect are law, those who would impose additional punitive measures against South Africa have the challenge of fashioning a sanctions package that can garner the support of the necessary majority of the 435 members of the House of Representatives and the 100 members of the Senate to override a predictable presidential veto and the procedural roadblocks that would inevitably be invoked in both chambers by opponents of further economic sanctions. The Senate’s cherished right of open-ended debate can be limited only by the vote of 60 percent of the full membership. Thus, for an economic sanctions measure to be voted in the Senate and sent to the president, the sponsors must craft a proposal that would gain the support of at least 60 of the 100 members of the upper house. It requires 67 members of the Senate and 290 members of the House to override a presidential veto. I have seen no proposal in either chamber that could gain such support.

Alternatives to Further Sanctions
With further economic sanctions now virtually eliminated as the basic building block of U.S. (or, indeed, Western European) policy toward South Africa in the foreseeable future, it seems to me that those whose task it will be to forge an effective policy for either a Republican or Democratic successor administration will have to opt for a variation of the longstanding policy of active participation in the promotion of internal political evolution.

Dare we say the two words that have been used recently to describe such a policy? No, we cannot. The words “constructive” and “engagement” are both applicable, but the combination of the two has taken on so many different meanings for so many different constituencies, both in the United States and in South Africa, that the term can no longer be used in any South African context. But whatever language is employed (a nameless policy would be best), the emphasis should be on seeking out positive opportunities to promote change in South Africa rather than on the negativism of economic sanctions.

In 1983, Senator Nancy Kassebaum (R-Kansas), then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s subcommittee on Africa, introduced legislation creating a new program to provide grants of up to $10,000 for projects in South Africa that promote “a more just society” or “aid victims of apartheid.” The size of each grant was deliberately limited with the object of pressing the U.S. embassy in Pretoria into contact with a wide range of individuals and groups. It was implicit that official U.S. government grants to projects would extend to official U.S. interest and protection.
Similarly, bills introduced in 1985 and 1986 by Senator Lugar and cosponsors Robert Dole (R-Kansas), Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky), and other key Republicans focused on strengthening the executive branch's hand in extending positive support to change in South Africa. Although these bills ultimately were amended in committee or on the floor of the Senate to include economic sanctions, it is noteworthy that the bills as originally introduced were primarily positive in tone, and that the 1986 Anti-Apartheid Act retains many of the Lugar elements. For example:

- It mandates fair employment practices for U.S. companies operating in South Africa, and also for the U.S. embassy.
- It grants contract preferences to black-owned firms in South Africa, and exempts them from some of the Act's sanctions.
- It mandates scholarships in South Africa for black South Africans, at all age and educational levels, thus expanding the range of socioeconomic groups in the black community receiving U.S. educational assistance.
- It provides for assistance to black South African teachers who have not completed their education, increases funding for the Kassebaum human rights grants, and expands the Kassebaum grant categories to include legal assistance.
- The Lugar contribution to the package also directs the Department of State to purchase housing in white neighborhoods as a trustee for any black employee of the U.S. government who wishes to live there. In effect, this innovation pushes the U.S. embassy to go a vital step beyond the Sullivan Principles to ensure that its program of housing assistance for black employees is administered in compliance with U.S. fair housing principles and practice. Helping house black employees in so-called white areas is a quiet way of challenging and contributing to the end of a pillar of apartheid, the Group Areas Act.

The significance of these low-profile initiatives is to demonstrate that outsiders can speed the pace of change by establishing new precedents — testing the water by availing themselves of the benefits of their outsider status. This is especially relevant in South Africa, a society in which changes in the law have generally followed rather than preceded changes in practice.

**Some Further Guidelines**

There must be an element of confrontation if a U.S. president is to conduct a policy toward South Africa that has the required public and congressional support. As new precedents are tried, laws initially will be broken and old ways ignored.

Too often, we have missed opportunities to send a clear message of our opposition to apartheid. For sound humanitarian reasons, we provided assistance to the victims of apartheid who were forcibly removed in 1983 and 1984 from their homes in the village of Mogopa in the Transvaal to be resettled elsewhere. That money could have been better used to promote change in South Africa had we provided our financial and other assistance before rather than after the removal. If Mogopa had been made a focal point for some U.S. aid programs, the South African authorities would have had to face the decision of bulldozing projects funded by U.S. taxpayers.

Such public confrontations with the apartheid system would do much to improve U.S. official standing in the black community in South Africa. If we can establish at minimal level of credibility among blacks, it would enhance the possibility that we might be able to play a role in furthering a less violent evolution of South Africa. This is not to say that the United States should make all its decisions on the basis of black demands or expectations. Rather, we should conduct ourselves in ways that leave no doubt that we are fully committed to a democratic outcome, in the full sense of the term "democratic." Under no circumstances should the United States allow anyone in South Africa, black or white, to dictate whether and under what circumstances we meet with any individual or political element.

There is perhaps, and I emphasize the word perhaps, a useful role for Americans, official and unofficial, as interlocutors between black and white South Africans and between those inside and outside the country. We can play that role, however, only by invitation — an invitation that must be earned to be extended. Without such an invitation, all we can do is to use every available opening to encourage the different factions to enter into dialogue. If South Africa is to avoid a violent disintegration of its society, those who wish to contribute to positive change need to explore the possibilities of external assistance in the area of communication. There is a possible role for us in helping various factions cut through stereotypes and ameliorate some of the hostility and suspicion.

One danger that may arise over the next decade is that the United States could become too deeply involved in South Africa's evolution, too prescriptive about the structure of a "truly democratic" government, and too specific about "legitimate" and "credible" leaders. Only South Africans have the right to sit down and negotiate their country's future and to determine the structure of the historic compromise needed to avoid large-scale racial violence. I work for an institution, the United States Senate, which is the product of a historic compromise 200 years ago between this new nation's large and small constituent states. If England can have a queen, and Americans a Senate that gives 40 times more influence to a voter in sparsely populated Wyoming than to a voter in California, then it seems to me that there is a broad range of "democratic" outcomes that can be envisioned in South Africa. The greatest challenge to U.S. policymakers in the years just ahead may be to resist the seductive lure of neocolonialism and to respect black South Africans' ability and sole right to forge their own compromises.
We must show uncharacteristic restraint in prescribing for South Africa for two reasons:

First, 25 million black South Africans are going to have more leaders emerging than any American 8,000 miles away will be able to identify. There are and always will be a multiplicity of special interest groups in this diverse society. A complex of regional, economic, educational, religious, and ethnic factors is certain to result in a highly diverse leadership group.

Second, we must resist trying to choose black leaders for the simple reason that we do not fully understand the complex criteria of leadership in black South African society. While black South Africans are in many ways the most “Americanized” people in Africa, they are not clones. They look for a different mix of qualities in their leaders than we do. If we are to relate meaningfully with a postapartheid South Africa, we are going to have to start looking at relationships within that country through South African prisms. And this means setting aside our stereotypes of blacks, Coloureds, Afrikaners, English-speakers, and all other aspects of a society that never was quite the morality play we perceived it to be and is becoming more complicated with each passing day.

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Mr. Christenson’s contribution is an expanded version of comments made in a panel session of a conference on “South Africa in Transition” recently held in White Plains, New York, under the sponsorship of the Center for Management, Baruch College, City College of New York. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, or any member thereof.