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WHITE HOUSE WHISPERS ITS SOUTH AFRICA PROTEST

Imagine this scenario: Prior to this country's entry into World War II, President Roosevelt reluctantly meets with a Jewish rabbi who gives reports of the horrors of the death camps at Buchenwald and Dachau. The rabbi asks President Roosevelt to ban U.S. investments in German industries and to exert strong pressure on Hitler to stop the annihilation of the Jews in Germany and their relocation to Nazi concentration camps. Instead, the rabbi is told by Roosevelt that the U.S. is pursuing a policy of "constructive engagement" and that Germany had made "constructive changes" in its policies towards the Jewish population.

Does this sound absurd? Does it seem unlikely that the United States would, think that it could dissuade Hitler from carrying out his aims by pumping U.S. investments into his Germany? Does it sound equally ridiculous that Roosevelt would have had the gall to tell a person who had survived Hitler's barbarity that the person was mistaken and, in fact, things were getting better?

(more)

It does sound absurd. But a similar scenario is now being enacted by the White House in its dealings with South Africa and those who oppose that racist and dehumanizing regime. After much pressure President Reagan finally consented to meet with Bishop Tutu, Black south african bishop who was this year's winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Mr. Reagan said, after the meeting, "I have to disagree with him on the fact that the situation has worsened. It has not."

Of course, Mr. Reagan said nothing about the South African government's wanton murder in the majority-Black population. Nor did he comment on the relocation of thousands of africans to desolate "homelands" -- South Africa's version of the concentration camp. Mr. Reagan did, however, attempt a spurious explanation of why the 14.6 billion dollar investment which U.S. companies have provided to South Africa is actually a good thing. These investments contribute mightily to that racist government's survival.

The absurdity does not end there, however. The President then added insult to injury by stating that the release of 11 jailed Black labor leaders in South Africa was accomplished by his administration's "quiet diplomacy". He went on to say that the massive protest and jailings which have occurred at the South African Embassy and its consulates all over this country had nothing whatsoever to do with the prisoners' release. Since Mr. Reagan has been getting a lot of bad press lately for his Administration's continued support of the South African regime, we can understand why he would want to take credit for their release, no matter how ridiculous his claims may sound.

This Administration, however, should be alerted that it's usual attempt to manipulate the news will not work this time. As the protest and the jailings prove, the American people will no longer allow the White House to bolster the South African regime on the one hand while mouthing zephyr-like protest on the other. This particular charade has now ended.

This is Charles E. Cobb of the United Church of Christ for Civil Rights Journal.

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