



# American Committee On Africa

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*Mixed signals for Pretoria*

## The Cold War meets the winds of change

**W**HAT ARE WE to make of U.S. policy toward South Africa? Both the administration and the Congress have demonstrated an inability to articulate a

consistent approach that takes into account not only developments in South Africa, but also South Africa's role in its region. As a result inconsistent statements are made, contradictory measures are passed. And Pretoria continues to understand that popular sentiment and activism in the U.S. may force politicians into anti-apartheid rhetoric and even action. But when the issues can be successfully posed in "anticommunist" or "antiterrorist" terms, old instincts are likely to draw Washington and Pretoria into the same camp.

On September 9, President Reagan announced that he was taking administrative steps to implement some limited economic sanctions against South Africa. This step represents a major reversal of policy; he has consistently opposed what he called "punitive sanctions." The step came just before a Senate vote that would have placed legislation on Reagan's desk requiring somewhat stronger measures against the apartheid government. In an effort to avoid vetoing the congressional measure—the votes to override the veto were virtually assured—the president seized the initiative. In an attempt to maintain control of U.S. action vis-a-vis South Africa, but omitting the most substantive provision of the legislation, he issued an executive order.

Whether the Congress acquiesces in the president's maneuver or insists on moving ahead with its own measure will probably be decided before this article is in print. And however compromised, this action marks the first time the sanctions debate has moved from the halls of the United Nations to the mainstream of U.S. politics.

But, the same Congress that voted for sanctions, forcing the president's hand, in the same session, repealed the Clark Amendment. That measure, passed in 1976, created a legislative barrier to U.S. paramilitary intervention in Angola. Prior to 1976, in an unsuccessful

effort to keep Agostinho Neto's Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) from coming to power in Angola, the CIA gave covert support to UN-

ITA, the South African-backed guerrilla movement. The Clark Amendment forced the CIA to back off from that support. The lifting of this barrier in July was quickly overshadowed by the news from South Africa, but it needs to be remembered as an indication of continued U.S. alignment with Pretoria's regional war.

The repeal of the Clark Amendment had little to do with Angola. Rather, it was motivated in large measure by congressional competition at the game of "more anti-communist than thou" and frustration at the latest Middle East hostage crisis. The action was also the result of a longstanding conservative campaign to eradicate residual symptoms of the "Vietnam syndrome," which combined suspicion and caution toward intervention with respect for diversity in the international community. The consequences for southern Africa—intended or unintended—are serious.

Repealing the Clark Amendment not only stripped what tattered shreds of credibility remained from the Reagan administration's diplomacy of regional detente in southern Africa. It also sent a signal of encouragement to South Africa's regional hawks, and did much to offset the positive effect of anti-apartheid legislation still under consideration.

It is probably not entirely a coincidence that Pretoria's July 20 declaration of a state of emergency came little more than a week after the House joined the Senate in repealing the Clark Amendment and after Senate conservatives had blocked efforts to strengthen the sanctions bill on the floor. The declaration of the state of emergency was probably inevitable, given the escalation of internal conflict in South Africa. But its timing may well have been related to actions by the U.S. Congress, which have blurred and confused what might have been a strong signal of disapproval to the apartheid regime.

Washington is not, of course, the primary influence on Pretoria's internal policies, nor on its conflict with its neighbors, a confrontation that is rooted in South Africa's intransigent defense of its internal system of white

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minority rule. But events of the last few months do give some indication that mixed signals from Washington help keep the green light shining for Pretoria's regional aggression and internal repression. There is, moreover, considerable evidence that South Africa gives careful consideration to the intentional or inadvertent signals coming from Washington, at least in judging the timing and intensity of its attacks on neighboring countries. Events of the last ten years bear this out.

The South African invasion of Angola in 1975, at a time when Pretoria was pursuing a policy of detente elsewhere in the region, came after the U.S. had decided on covert intervention to keep the MPLA from gaining power. The invasion also came in response to direct U.S. encouragement, a fact leading to much bitterness among South Africa's leaders when Congress then passed the Clark Amendment blocking further CIA involvement. In 1978, South Africa's largest air attack on Angola to that date—the May 4 massacre of over 675 Namibian refugees at Cassinga—came as gossip circulated in Washington about new U.S. efforts to counter "Soviet-Cuban adventurism" in Africa, and the *New Yorker* reported National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski's desire to repeal the Clark Amendment and step up opposition to the Angolan government. The U.S. has never recognized the Angolan government. And although the Clark Amendment prohibited direct support, there were continuing allegations that the U.S. at least indirectly encouraged support for UNITA from other quarters.

South Africa launched its first open raid on Mozambique's capital Maputo in January 1981, only days after the inauguration of President Reagan and a militant speech by Secretary of State Alexander Haig denouncing "international terrorism." The attack on Maseru, capital of Lesotho, killing 42 people, came in December 1982, shortly after the U.S. had endorsed a \$1.1 billion line of credit from the International Monetary Fund to South Africa. In each case South African spokesmen justified their actions by citing parallel U.S. warnings against subversive threats in Central America. Pretoria was confident that the Reagan administration would give priority to Cold War sentiment, accepting Pretoria's label of "terrorists" for its opponents. In each case, as expected, the U.S. veto in the UN Security Council was available to block potential economic sanctions.

Early this year Pretoria appeared to be moderating its regional stance. In February, Botswana officials were told South Africa accepted their assurances that they permitted no activities by African National Congress guerrillas in their territory. In April, South African troops withdrew from Angola, fulfilling, after a year's delay, the U.S.-brokered withdrawal pledge of February 1984. In mid-May, however, a powerful car bomb in Botswana's capital killed South African exile Vernon Nkadimeng. Then, on May 22, a South African elite

commando unit was captured in Angola, surprised in the act of sabotaging oil storage tanks at the Gulf Oil installation in Cabinda.

In the past, such raids have been claimed by UNITA, which continues to fight to overthrow the Angolan government. But with captured South African commandos openly confessing their mission to the press, the venture was clearly a violation of the withdrawal agreement the U.S. had arranged. It was a slap in the face for U.S. diplomats seeking to arrange Cuban withdrawal from Angola and an independence settlement in South Africa-ruled Namibia. But the U.S. reaction was muted, confirming Pretoria's understanding that it need not fear international repercussions from its acts of aggression against its neighbors.

Only a week later, President Reagan's personal greetings were delivered to an unusual gathering at UNITA's headquarters in southern Angola. The bearer of the greeting was New York Republican Lewis Lehrman, who had organized a meeting of anticommunist guerrillas that included Nicaraguan contras. The spectacle was a striking demonstration of the priority of Cold War politics over regional realities in the U.S. vision of southern Africa. UNITA is not only engaged in joint military operations with South Africa. The movement has also made no secret of its policy of terrorist attacks on civilians, has made a practice of kidnaping hostages of Western as well as Eastern-bloc countries, and only in December had destroyed a civilian U.S. aircraft, taking two American and twenty other hostages and holding them for a month. Now UNITA was being told by a representative of the U.S. president: "Your goals are our goals." It was hardly necessary to add "and South Africa's."

### Patting the dogs of war

Even more helpful for the hawks in Pretoria's State Security Council, because less predictable, were the subsequent events in Congress. There was no congressional call for strong retaliation against South Africa for its raid into Angola, no outraged cries against the threat to American citizens and property in Cabinda. As mentioned earlier, the House did vote 295 to 127 on June 5 to approve an anti-apartheid act, including bans on Krugers and on new investment. But the Angolan attack played little role in the debate, and a stronger bill introduced by Rep. Ronald Dellums mandating comprehensive sanctions won only 77 backers.

These were the events that preceded the June 11 action by the Senate which voted 63 to 34 to repeal the Clark Amendment. Thus, both the president and the Senate were signaling support for South Africa's surrogate in Angola instead of moving toward stronger condemnation of South African regional aggression. On June 12, in a parallel tilt, the House of Representatives

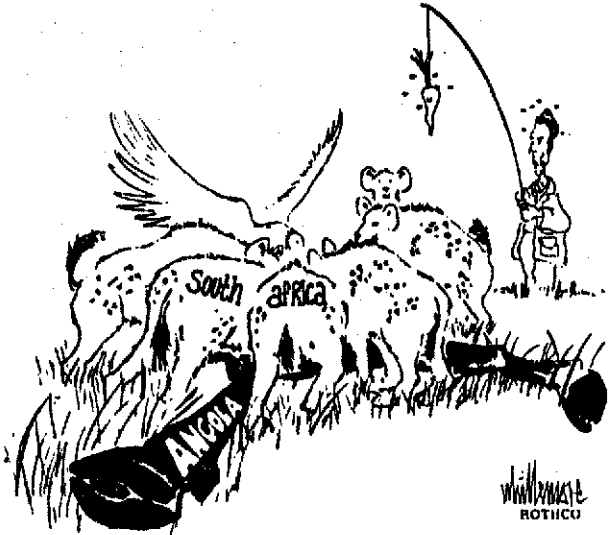
caved in to Reagan's campaign for support to the contra insurgency in Nicaragua. Can Pretoria be faulted for concluding that when push comes to shove, the old Cold War verities would take priority over the new anti-apartheid rhetoric?

Less than 48 hours later, discounting possible repercussions in Washington, a South African commando unit moved into Gaborone, the capital of Botswana. In the June 14 raid, their first overt attack on a neighboring country in more than a year, South African commandos destroyed ten houses and killed 15 people. In a press conference following the raid, South Africa Defense Force chief Constand Viljoen said the action was necessary to counter guerrilla actions by the banned African National Congress. Moreover, he added, the possibility of an international outcry had been "very carefully debated and thought out."

The U.S. government responded by withdrawing Ambassador Herman Nickel from Pretoria for consultations, a significant diplomatic step. There was no sign, however, that the Reagan administration was ready to abandon its policy of "constructive engagement" or its opposition to "punitive sanctions" against the apartheid regime. In three separate votes in late June, the UN Security Council condemned the Cabinda raid, the Botswana raid, and South African unilateral installation of an "interim" government in Namibia. But U.S. and other Western pressure insured that no new sanctions were adopted.

The reaction from the U.S. media and from Congress to the Botswana raid was muted, and what little there was was soon drowned out by the drama of hostages in Beirut. A not untypical article in *Newsweek* repeatedly labeled the victims of the South African raid as "terrorists." And almost as if the issues of apartheid and South African regional aggression were unrelated, the raid, like the Cabinda attack, seemed to have little effect on the debate over sanctions legislation.

On July 11, the Senate approved 80 to 12 its version of a sanctions bill, blocking new bank loans to the South African government and exports of nuclear technology, after agreement was reached with Senator Jesse Helms that no strengthening amendments would be introduced. Backers of the bill agreed that the action, although an important symbol, omitted the most substantive provision of the House version, a ban on new investment. The same day, in an equally symbolic vote, the House passed by 236 to 185 a foreign aid bill which included the repeal of the Clark Amendment. Exceeding even the Reagan administration's anticommunist zeal, the House added a provision forbidding development aid to Mozambique, the southern African country which has suffered the most devastating attacks from South Africa's destabilization campaign. (The final bill, after conference, permitted aid to Mozambique's private sector.) The simul-



taneous actions could only confirm African impressions that U.S. southern Africa policy, even when not consistently indifferent or hostile to African liberation, remained hopelessly confused.

Little more than a week later, the South African government declared the state of emergency. Although the measure adds little to the government's already formidable police state powers, it is expected to make independent reporting of detentions and confrontations even more difficult than at present. And in all likelihood it will contribute to the government's efforts to portray its actions as necessary in order to maintain order and counter "terrorism."

The main source of such "terrorism," according to the government, has been the African National Congress. In fact, the ANC has been extraordinarily restrained in its guerrilla campaign, taking care to minimize civilian casualties in its sabotage actions and selectively targeting agents of the government. As the civil war escalates, however, there are certain to be more and more victims of mob action. Even now, these incidents rival police shootings in press coverage though not in actual frequency. And imagine the impact on Western television viewers when the victims begin to include whites. When this happens the South African government can be expected to present itself not as the defender of apartheid, but simply as the victim of and protector against "terrorism."

The executive order issued by President Reagan is, he says, an effort to give a clear signal to Pretoria of a unified U.S. policy. In fact, what Reagan has done is to take the teeth out of an already weak set of sanctions. The importation of Krugerrands will be banned, but only on consultation with the trading partners of the U.S., which could take as long as two years. Much more seriously, the congressional version of sanctions required a ban on new investment in South Africa if, after 12 months, progress

had not been made in solving South Africa's racial problems. This deadline has been abandoned. The congressional sanctions were understood by their supporters to be a first step, having an impact only if seen as a portent of far stronger actions to come. Reagan's sanctions indicate the opposite, as if he is signaling Pretoria that they need not worry that stricter sanctions will follow. The danger of this approach is that they will suffer the same fate as Carter administration rhetoric against South Africa, which Pretoria correctly recognized to be a bluff and successfully defied. The arms embargo adopted in late 1977, after the death of Steve Biko, marked the high point of U.S. action against Pretoria, and South Africa judged that comprehensive economic sanctions would remain outside the bounds of serious political consideration in Washington. Reagan's executive order indicates that he would like Pretoria to continue in this belief. But Reagan is not the only player, and this time pressure for sanctions will continue from other quarters.

### **Apartheid no, repression maybe**

It has taken enormous efforts by anti-apartheid activists, in Washington and around the country, as well as repeated South African moves to discredit their own talk of reform, to bring the issue this far on the U.S. political scene. The movement is far broader than the congressional front alone; divestment actions by cities, states, universities, and churches are having their own effect. Many countries, including Canada, France, and Australia, have already taken stronger actions than those the

U.S. mandates.

The intransigence of the South African government itself is the most powerful public relations weapon of its opponents. President P.W. Botha's hardline speech of late August did nothing to discourage the imposition of sanctions against his country. If anything it gave ammunition to the supporters of sanctions. But the Clark Amendment repeal is a sobering reminder that nominal anti-apartheid sentiment can coexist with support for South Africa's attacks on its neighbors. And even the House version of the anti-apartheid bill would have made only a limited dent in existing U.S. economic ties with Pretoria. It will take far more extensive action, over a long period, to impair significantly Pretoria's capacity to maintain control. Even with the accelerating pace of events, the prospect is for a long struggle, with many confusing twists and turns that may obscure the clarity of the anti-apartheid cause.

These twists and turns have already begun. On August 27, the South African government suspended trading on the stock and currency markets until September 2 as the rand fell to 35 cents, its lowest price ever. The move came after months of increasing capital flow from the country. This decline in business confidence in South Africa was, of course, caused by sanctions actions and internal strife. On September 1, the government announced it had suspended repayment of the principal on \$15 billion in foreign debts for four months.

During the same period and for the first time the Reagan administration called on the South African government to include the African National Congress in any discussions with black leaders about the country's future. What was said to South Africa's central bank governor, Gerhard de Kock, during his visit to the U.S. to try to win an extension of credit for South Africa was not made public.

On September 5, South Africa's Deputy Foreign Minister Louis Nel, in a further effort to counter sanctions, announced a major propaganda campaign to convince the world that "our neighboring states will suffer before we do" if strict sanctions are imposed.

In a political environment where it is very difficult to communicate more than one idea at a time, the connections between apartheid and South Africa's aggression against its neighbors is easily lost, especially when South Africa expresses concern for them in its propaganda. Even when activists stress the point, it is often ignored by the media and the wider anti-apartheid constituency. But if that connection is not communicated, understanding of the region falls by default into the anticommunist mold so congenial to Pretoria and Washington. If that understanding is accepted, the danger is that nominal anti-apartheid sentiment will shift over into support for South Africa in its efforts to fight "communism" and "terrorism" not only in the region, but also at home. □

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