

Review of the Study Commission on U.S. Policy Toward South Africa,

SOUTH AFRICA: TIME RUNNING OUT

by Senator Paul E. Tsongas

An informed reader of the Rockefeller Commission Report recently told me that his first impression was not enthusiastic. Then he read the Report again and then a third time. At each reading, his assessment changed. His final judgment? He called the Report a deeply thoughtful analysis coupled with solid policy recommendations. I agree. The Commission's work is deceptively straightforward and concise. It deserves a close and careful reading to fully appreciate its depth. Beneath the well publicized recommendations on the glamour issues -- investment, strategic minerals and the Cape Route -- there is a comprehensive, systematic and integrated analysis of one of the most vexing policy questions of our time.

More than a dry policy study, the Commission's report will serve as both a general text on South Africa as well as a sophisticated policy framework for analysts and decision-makers. The background chapters are reliable, forthright and up to date. The concluding chapters are carefully drawn and consistent with the facts. Of particular interest and merit are the highly revealing interviews with South Africans which appear at various junctures in the text.

The report comes to us at a pregnant moment in the evolution of U.S. policy. A new American president with very precise views on human rights, the Third World and the Soviet threat is in the process of redefining American policy for South Africa. The Commission, composed of established corporate, academic and philanthropic figures, has struck a decidedly moderate tone on a number of key issues. The Report recommends against the withdrawal ^{Out for a modification, and} of U.S. investment from South Africa, for the Sullivan principles, against trade embargoes, for evolutionary change, and against rigid one-man, one-vote formulas. Yet the Commission finds itself perched well to the left of President Reagan's emerging policy. The differences are instructive.

The Commission calls for extending the U.S. arms embargo to include U.S. corporate subsidiaries operating abroad. The Administration publishes new regulations weakening the arms embargo and holds official meetings with South African military intelligence personnel. The Commission recommends a flexible policy of rewards and sanctions keyed to progressive or regressive steps taken by the South African government. The Administration, faced with an avalanche of bad news from South Africa, welcomes Foreign Minister Pik Botha to Washington, allows the national South African rugby team to tour the U.S., offers concessions on the Namibia negotiations, and takes a hardline approach to South Africa's Cuban antagonists in Angola. Rewards for bad behavior are not what the Commissioners had in mind.

Why is a middle of the road policy study suddenly irrelevant in the White House? What separates two corporate chief executive officers, two university presidents and the President of the Ford Foundation, ^{and the Carnegie Corporation} from Ronald Reagan on the South African issue?

The easy answers come to mind first. Reflexive anti-Communism and a de-emphasis of human rights certainly were not part of the Commission's assumptions. And the Commission's doubts about the strategic minerals issue and the Cape Route thesis have not endeared their work to the "realists" of the Administration. But there is more to the chasm than those differences create. At the heart of the issue is South Africa itself.

Outsiders, and frequently Americans, have failed to break through a veil of myths surrounding South Africa. The first might be titled the myth of voluntary reform. Outsiders are always struck by the vast scope and opportunity for practical reforms in South Africa. With the apartheid structure so rigid and so out-moded, it is assumed that piecemeal yet cumulative change cannot help but take place. All that Pretoria need do, is act. It does not. As one South African Black told the Commissioners, "Change is like love in this country; it's in the eyes of the beholder."

The glacial progress is not due to a lack of ideas. And there is considerable pressure from blacks. The hitch is the white electorate, which according to a second myth, is more liberal and change-oriented than the government. It is not. The Commission stumbled on this point, arguing that Prime Minister Botha could establish a new political base on this growing "verligte" constituency. The polls from South Africa encouraged that judgment. But Botha's recent election rhetoric was anything but reform oriented. He talked tough on apartheid, on Namibia, on Black Africa and the ANC. The electorate, however, remembered his earlier calls for pragmatic change and deserted him in large numbers for the rigidly pro-apartheid Herstigte National Party. The issue, as always, was survival. And the South African white electorate is very much a single issue constituency. That one issue, if invoked, will exert inordinate influence on voter behavior. We have the single issue phenomenon here in the U.S. as does Prime Minister Begin in Israel. In South Africa, that single issue of survival throws the democratic process back on itself and frustrates political evolution.

I am reminded of an American parallel. Anti-Soviet fears and anxieties run deep here. They are politically useful. The debate on nuclear arms control has been a major arena for exploiting such fears. Therefore, when the SALT treaty came before the Senate after years of tough negotiation with the Soviets, it was branded as a concession to the Communist enemy. The arms control process was thrown back on itself, just as "swart gevar" (Black fear) paralyzes the South African electorate and its representatives.

The Reagan Administration has embarked on a policy of "constructive engagement" with South Africa. That policy assumes that the carrot will generate far more South African progress and cooperation than the stick. The policy implicitly accepts the myth of voluntary reform. There are no crippling upheavals in the Administration's view of the South African future.

The Commission to its credit refrains from choosing any one scenario over another. On the one hand, it identifies an evolutionary, erratically violent, but essentially progressive scenario toward a negotiated transition to majority rule. The report also sets out a second scenario of escalating guerilla sabotage and violence in the face of an intractable, repressive minority regime. The end of that track is a violent transition, a victory for Soviet-supported forces, and a high risk of damage to U.S. interests. Underlying the Commission's assessment of trends and prospects, however, is one key conclusion: "Whatever the South African government does to reinforce the status quo, black forces inside the country will alter it."

On that point, the Commission penetrates a third enduring myth -- that the South African military will insure the survival of the present regime. Any visitor to South Africa or reader of The Military Balance is convinced of South Africa's extraordinary military strength. The country is a fortress to its neighbors and the Commission sets out exactly why. There is, however, no precedent in history for a military solution to a profoundly internal crisis. The intimate and growing

ties of blacks to the South African economy and society are not signs of racial harmony, but of a remorseless modernization process equipping the disenfranchised with new levers of power. Each year, the vulnerabilities of the present regime multiply. Each year, tactical options for Blacks proliferate. Behind the walls of the fortress, the structure is less secure.

On this question, the Commission again collides with the present Administration, which accepts the fortress myth, at least for the short term, and interprets American interests in South Africa accordingly. It is, perhaps, a bit early to criticize the new Administration on South Africa. And, in Reagan's defense, it can be said that President Carter's policies did not produce the desired results. A new approach may be required. But with Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe under majority rule, and with the ANC growing in sophistication and support, one would expect most policy makers to acknowledge the Commission's conclusion that in South Africa, "time is running out."

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