CHAPTER III

THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH AFRICA

UNTIL 1969: AN OVERVIEW

As early as the seventeenth century the colonists of North America were familiar with Southern Africa which was separated from their land by the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Southern Africa was not known for its slaves but there are evidences that slave cargoes were brought from Mozambique to the Americas round the Cape of Good Hope. After the American War of Independence, South Africa acquired importance being the gateway to the Indian Ocean and the lands beyond where Americans had commercial interests. Cape Town was the most important way station on such voyages and in course of time American trading ships were a common sight there. Simultaneous with the halt for water, provisions and rest, there arose an interest in the produce of the land. The other group of Americans active in the surrounding waters were the

1. It was only in the late seventeen eighties that the thirteen American colonies formed the United States of America. Likewise the Union of South Africa came into existence only in 1910 with the merger of Cape, Natal, Transvaal and Orange Free State. In this context the expression 'South Africa' would mean any of the four territories.
whalers whose acquaintance with the region may be best expressed in Herman Melville's words:

The Cape of Good Hope and all the watery region about there, is much like some noted four corners where you meet more travellers than in any other part.[2]

American missionaries, miners and prospectors also made their presence felt in South Africa. In missionary work the pioneer was the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). The others included the African Methodist Church, one of the leading churches in the United States. The discovery of gold and diamonds attracted large numbers of miners and prospectors. "They were full of radiant hope, they believed in their star, in their own strength", when they began arriving from the mid eighteen sixties onwards.  

The foreign policy creed of the United States for a century and a half after the adoption of the Constitution

2. When Herman Melville wrote "Moby Dick" in 1851 American whaling ships used to sail to Southern African waters from Nantucket, New Bedford, Newport and New London.


was isolationism. This meant territorial noninvolvement outside the Americas but did not imply abstaining from commercial relations. In all respects Africa was a low priority area. Although it sent representatives to the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 regarding the partition of Africa, the United States declared that it "could not join in the responsible political engagements in so remote and undefined a region as that of the Congo basin". If there was any interest at all it was in Liberia and South Africa. The attitude towards the rest of the continent was influenced by the European colonial powers particularly Britain. However, the United States established its first consulate anywhere in Africa, in Cape Town in 1799. The other consulates in South Africa were started in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Durban in 1891, 1898 and 1906 respectively.

A singular event that elicited some interest on the part of the United States in South Africa was the Boer War of 1899-1902 between the British and the Boers. The American leadership sympathised with Britain but the United States maintained neutrality because a large number


of Dutch and Irish immigrants supported the Boer cause. The American support for Britain was the logical and nearly inevitable result of racial, economic and humanitarian considerations.

Following World War I, South Africa joined the League of Nations which was very much a creation of Jan Christian Smuts as that of Woodrow Wilson. Under the Mandate system instituted to govern the territories of the defeated powers, South Africa received South West Africa (Namibia), the independence of which was a prominent issue until 1990 and in which the United States had an important role to play. During the war, capital from the United States began entering the South African economy. At a time when economic instability had begun with the war, the mining industry had acquired sufficient capital to open new ventures. It was under such circumstances that the Anglo-American Corporation was formed in 1917 and named so


by the Oppenheisers in appreciation of the help received from the United States. 10

The interwar period was a significant one in the relations between the United States and South Africa. In 1929 South Africa opened a diplomatic mission in the United States and in 1942 its first press and public relations officer to that country was appointed. 11 Around the same time American interest in the continent increased not insignificantly, with the creation of a desk in 1938 to deal with African affairs and to concentrate exclusively on the problems of Africa. 12 However on the international scene whereas the United States returned to her former policy of isolation, South Africa continued to be an active member in the comity of nations.

By 1945 South Africa's standing in the eyes of the West increased considerably because of its role in the defeat of the Axis powers. In the postwar situation United States and South Africa were partners in the fight against communism and Soviet expansionism. The South

10. Today the name Anglo-American is a misnomer because the interests of the company are controlled by South Africans.


Africans contributed to the organized effort of the United States to repel the North Korean invasion of South Korea.\(^{13}\) With regard to the defence of the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, close links were established between them.\(^{14}\) During this period much of Africa remained in colonial hands. The Soviet Union had not yet interfered in the affairs of the continent in any serious manner and the United States also saw no point in doing the same in the absence of such a threat.\(^{15}\) Moreover the United States did not attack colonialism or South African racialism beyond a certain limit for fear of alienating its NATO allies or South Africa. After World War II, American capital found its way into other areas of the South African economy than mining, namely, automobiles, tyres, textiles, hosiery, petroleum, refrigeration and shipping.\(^{16}\) After 1948 when South Africa strengthened its racial apparatus, several steps


\(^{14}\) These issues have been discussed in Chapter II.

\(^{15}\) The United States policy of containment of the Soviet Union and Communist China was a principal reason for retaining a residual interest in Africa so as to avoid the possibility of a dangerous vacuum where a colonial power had failed to make a reasonable accommodation with a former colony.

were taken to improve relations with the United States. This included the strengthening of the embassy in Washington and the establishment of new consular missions in various parts of the United States. South Africa by this time had nine consular missions in the United States which was not an insignificant number. 17

By 1950 apartheid had become a burning issue at the United Nations. Until 1960 the United States was a dispassionate if not disinterested observer of South African affairs. During this period it refused to choose between its economic interests and moral responsibilities. In the 1952 United Nations debate the United States took a "middle of the road" position wishing to avoid "both excess of zeal and timid legislation in dealing with the question". 18 The United States on the one hand questioned the wisdom of the South African racial policy as being incompatible with the generally accepted interpretation of the obligations of the United Nations Charter. On the other hand it considered the role of the world body to be limited, that it could not intervene in matters essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of

17. Deon Geldenhuys, n.11, p.15.

states and that it could only proclaim standards, not impose them. The American middle of the road position must have been puzzling to the South Africans. John Gunther, the well known traveller and writer, on his visit to South Africa asked a cabinet minister what he thought of American policy towards Africa in general and South Africa in particular, to which he responded that the question was impossible to answer because nobody there had been able to figure out what American policy was.

In 1959 when the UN General Assembly condemned South Africa's discriminatory policies as no more a domestic matter but a threat to international harmony, the United States was among the sixty two members voting for the motion. The American delegate declared that "apartheid is a violation of human rights buttressed and sanctified by law". Even after the adverse American vote the South African Foreign Minister Eric Louw argued that it did not represent a change of United States policy. As he saw it, several pressures were operating on the United States whose delegation was led by a prominent labour leader known for his dislike of South Africa. In essence, Louw

19. Ibid.


was stating that whatever the public face of its policy, the United States would not pursue policies antagonistic to South Africa.22

By the late nineteen fifties, the United States dedication to peaceful and gradual change became obsolete in the turbulence of independence movements. The Eisenhower administration was obsessed with the menace of communism and this undermined its ability to understand African situations. By the time of the Sharpeville shootings in 1960 the United States decided that it would best serve national interest by distancing itself from the losing side of apartheid. Soon the term of the Eisenhower administration was to come to an end. There was a general feeling that American policy towards Africa as opposed to that of West Asia has had to deal with no exigent crisis. To an observer, if pointed out to that there were several African issues including that of apartheid, would reply thus:

True enough, and yet these difficulties, whatever dangers they hold for the future, are not yet of the proportion of the Suez crisis of 1956 or even the three other Arab-Israeli wars of 1948-1949, 1967 and 1973.[23]


With John F. Kennedy assuming the presidency of the United States there was an expectation of a re-examination of American policy. Africa had been an issue in his political tradition and he saw anticolonialism as a weapon in the Cold War, which even as an influence would ultimately weaken communism.\(^\text{24}\) Africa was to be the New Frontier in American foreign policy.\(^\text{25}\) Through anticolonialism and foreign aid, the American liberal concept of civil rights could be propagated. The issue of apartheid meant much to Kennedy whose advisers were strong supporters of the civil rights campaign in the United States. His senior officials like Adlai Stevenson, Chester Bowles, Averell Harriman and G. Mennen Williams were strongly pro African, and the ambassadors to Africa were liberal American intellectuals.\(^\text{26}\) When G. Mennen Williams was appointed the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs it was announced that in the

---

\(^\text{24}\) In a speech to the Senate in July he was critical of French colonialism as well as the American policy of support to France on the Algerian issue. He later became Chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

\(^\text{25}\) New Frontier referred to the collective name of Kennedy's policies; characteristic programmes aimed at space exploration, improved science education and extension of civil rights protections.

\(^\text{26}\) However, few committed liberals were appointed to high posts because Kennedy considered them too ideological, too zealous and too talkative.
administration the new post would be "second to none" in importance. 27

The United States joined regularly in the ritual condemnation of apartheid and also attempted through diplomatic channels to convince South Africa of the hopelessness of its policy. But the American voice had "barely been audible except joining in the global catharsis of castigating South Africa". 28 Washington was disinclined to participate in the coercive measures designed to eliminate racial injustice in South Africa. At the same time it cooperated with South Africa in matters of strategic military importance. Senator Wayne Morse, a critic of American policy stated:

As long as the Union of South Africa continues its inhumane apartheid policy, the United States cannot justify any form of economic aid ... even though it is clothed in the rationalization of military defence. 29


Opposing sanctions against South Africa the American representative in the United Nations, Francis T.P. Plimpton stated:

Our primary objection to these harsh measures is that they simply will not accomplish what they are intended to do. If sanctions as extensive as these were to be approved and carried out, the effect could be an internal explosion in South Africa, the brunt of which could be borne by the very Africans we are striving to help.... To vote for this resolution ... would tend to weaken the United Nations without weakening apartheid.[30]

The United States was following a policy of voting condemnations of apartheid while opposing proposals for sanctions put forth by the members of the General Assembly. Kennedy was personally convinced that sanctions had no possibility of being implemented and was repelled by the unrealistic and grandiose resolutions calling for them. The administration was, however, aware that this passive posture was having a negative impact on the American standing in the eyes of Afro-Asian nations. Efforts were made to toughen the American position on racial matters. South Africa was not pleased when Mennen

---

Williams in a speech in Nairobi used the phrase 'Africa for Africans' and it denied him permission to visit South Africa.\textsuperscript{31} It was also only after 1961 that American delegates urged that South Africa violated Article 56 of the UN Charter by not promoting human rights.\textsuperscript{32}

Yet, the continued cooperation of the United States with South Africa was evident when the former's naval ships continued to call at South African ports. An agreement was announced for the establishment of a United States military space tracking station in South Africa, in exchange for the sale of American arms to South Africa for use against communist aggression.\textsuperscript{33} In the autumn of 1962 the African states brought a resolution in the United Nations calling on members to break their political and economic ties with South Africa and asking the Security Council to consider expelling it from the world body. The American delegate Plimpton stated that his country had already adopted and was enforcing the policy of forbidding

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ernst B. Haas, n.28, p.177.
\item \textsuperscript{33} The American policy towards Portugal also was on similar lines because it wanted access to the facilities in the Azores.
\end{itemize}
sales of arms to South Africa. 34 However, he omitted to mention that previously, Washington had agreed to sell certain kinds of weapons to South Africa in return for the establishment of the tracking station.

That the arms were supposed to be used exclusively against "communist aggression" did little to diminish the jarring impact on other African representatives, however, after the news of this gesture of collaboration with the South African regime leaked out.[35]

The United States declined to support the resolution and it deliberately tried to direct international attention from its advantageous economic ties with South Africa by taking public stances on political and military matters. 36 Plimpton maintained that the United States believed that apartheid could be ended not by the contraction of relations between South Africans and the rest of the world but by the enlargement of those relationships and by the full and continued exposure of the South African government and world opinion. 37


37. Statement by Francis T.P. Plimpton, n.34.
The General Assembly, however, passed the resolution by a large majority.

Arthur Schlesinger writes that the resolution made Kennedy impatient. So long as South Africa's trading partners declined to participate, the call for economic boycott would be meaningless. The administration was of the opinion that such resolutions, if they were meant for the discharge of emotions, would be ineffective if the boycott could be evaded. Schlesinger also states that the American refusal to support sanctions was readily accepted by the Africans because the United States doubted whether the provision of Chapter VII of the UN Charter on which the appeal of sanctions relied applied to the South African problem and also because of their faith in Kennedy's purposes. But African leaders warned the United States that it could no longer rely on verbal condemnation alone. Within the administration itself, Williams wrote in a memorandum that disapproval had to be backed by action and the area he indicated was the sale of arms. United States cooperation with South Africa on the tracking station stood as an obstacle. A full embargo too

39. Ibid.
could fall short of sanctions voted by the General Assembly in 1962. 40

The administration was in a dilemma. It was planning a total arms embargo while the African states desired nothing less than a full economic embargo. "The choice", wrote Schlesinger, "seemed almost to be between the military risk of losing the Azores and the South African tracking stations and the political risk of losing Africa". 41 The Secretary of Defence, Robert S. McNamara held the view that the South African decision be made on political, not military grounds and this was later endorsed by Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State. 42 The Chairman of the State Department's Advisory Council on African Affairs wrote:

By 1962 numerous African leaders who had welcomed Assistant Secretary William's visit in 1961 as a portent of great things to come were beginning to wonder whether the New Frontier was all public relations and no real help.[43]

Patrick Duncan, a prominent White South African politician and opponent of apartheid wrote in

40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., p. 537.
43. Cited in Arnold Rivkin, n. 27, p. 113.
Foreign Affairs that until then American policy in Africa had tried to avoid making choices trying to satisfy both metropole powers and emerging African nations. He continued:

Wise though this may be when there is a continuing dialogue between contending parties, or when political movement is generally in the desired direction, or when either side is subject to persuasion, such a policy merely ensures the hostility of both sides when, as in the case of South Africa, none of these conditions applies.[44]

The United States had to escape from this situation. The opportunity came in August 1963 when the Security Council was debating on a resolution calling for a ban on all arms sales to South Africa. During the deliberations the United States attempted a "somewhat overly diplomatic finesse".45 On August 2, 1963, speaking in support of the resolution, Ambassador Adlai Stevenson said that the United States had adopted and was enforcing the policy forbidding the sale of arms and military equipment to the South African government, whether from government or commercial sources, which could be used to enforce


apartheid or in the administration of South West Africa. He said that he was authorized to inform that the United States had decided to take steps to bring to an end the sale of all military equipment to the Government of South Africa by the end of the calendar year. He also stated that in future the United States had the right to interpret this policy in the light of requirements for assuring the maintenance of international peace and security. 46

In essence, before voting for the proposed ban which it did, the United States hurried to announce that it had already and unilaterally put such a ban into effect, either to avoid complying with a UN action, or to gain credit for initiative, or to create a smokescreen behind which to fulfil military commitments made to South Africa previously. 47 A few days later Stevenson's deputy, Charles Yost emphasized that in the American view the situation in South Africa was not much as to justify mandatory sanctions and moreover the sanctions called for


47. Waldemar A. Nielsen, n.35, p.296.
under the resolution were voluntary in character.\(^4^8\) The United States then supported the resolution calling on all states to cease forthwith the sale and shipment of arms, ammunition of all types and military vehicles to South Africa. The United States had felt that it was coming close to mandatory action and measures of force and, therefore, wanted to draw clear lines of demarcation around its position while at the same time giving way in some degree to Afro-Asian pressures. The resulting posture resembled one of "straddling the fence, with an ear to the ground, an eye to the future and a finger in the dyke".\(^4^9\)

Towards the end of the Kennedy administration the situation in South Africa had not improved a bit. Appeals to South Africa from the world community fell on deaf ears. The United States on its part voted against South Africa when it came to condemnation of apartheid but generally voted against all mandatory measures. It refused to consider the issues in South Africa as threats to peace within the meaning of the UN Charter. On the other hand the United States discouraged any high level


\(^{49}\) Waldemar A. Nielsen, n.35, p.297.
meeting particularly of the leaders of the two countries. The South African Prime Minister Verwoerd's proposal to meet Kennedy in Washington failed to evoke a favourable response. The highest level contact between the two states between 1958 and 1966 was a meeting between Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Eric Louw, the South African Foreign Minister, in 1962. In this regard Kennedy deviated from the antinationalist disposition of the United States in the Third World. But "his penchant was for making decisions at the margin, committing little, and leaving room for escape".

During the Johnson administration, despite the preoccupation with Vietnam, the framework of its policy towards South Africa was maintained and strengthened to some extent. Johnson was committed to the creation of a Great Society. However, under him South West Africa received more attention than South Africa itself.

50. Deon Geldenhuys, n.11, p.18.


52. Great Society was the collective name for the domestic programmes of Johnson which among other things envisioned an end to racial injustice.

53. In 1966 the United States took a leading role in drafting a General Assembly resolution condemning South Africa for its continued occupation of South West Africa/Namibia.
The policy of the previous administration of neither encouraging nor discouraging American investments continued and the administration tightened the observance of the voluntary arms embargo by refusing the sale of "gray area" material that could be used for both civilian and military purposes. 54

The Afro-Asian efforts for the application of economic sanctions against South Africa received a cool reception from Washington. The General Assembly's Special Committee on Apartheid placed much of the blame for the failure of its efforts on countries like the United States. The efforts of the Committee to include the United States in it were not successful because of the latter's refusal. 55 The administration also opposed the majority's desire in the United Nations to label apartheid "aggression" under Chapter VII of the Charter. 56 Most African leaders believed the American stand as one of "passive acceptance". 57 The United States continued with its cooperation in the nuclear field. In 1965 it granted

55. Amry Vandenbosch, n.18, pp.251-252.
56. Ernst B. Haas, n.28, p.183.
South Africa a nuclear reactor and in 1967 the nuclear energy agreement was renewed. Routine military and Central Intelligence Agency contacts continued undisturbed. 58

One incident that brought petty apartheid to the realm of foreign affairs was when the American aircraft carrier USS Roosevelt was scheduled to stop at Cape Town to refuel and give its crew shore leave. Much publicity was given to the segregated facilities and this created an uproar in the United States. Finally the captain of the carrier had to refuse its crew permission to go ashore and only made use of the refuelling facility. This eventually led to American naval ships calling in South African ports only in emergencies. 59

Assistant Secretary Williams, in a testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, stated that the United States had no prescription for South Africa. But along with its policy of persuasion it was keeping open the lines of communication. Exchange programmes were virtually suspended because of South African insistence on segregated audiences. Port calls of American naval

58. See Richard E. Bissel, n.6, pp.49-70; 103-117.
vessels were cancelled and the arms ban (except the supply of arms under the existing contracts and those necessary in the interests of world peace) was strictly being enforced. On the question of the cessation of investment, Williams said that it would harden South African policies even further, force South Africa to turn to other sources of investment, and accelerate its already considerable efforts to achieve economic self sufficiency. 60

George Houser, Executive Director of the American Committee on Africa, characterised American policy as being one of "reluctant concern". Time and again general policy statements were contradicted by actions and it looked like hypocrisy to the world. He wanted the United States to begin the process of disengagement with South Africa because both morally and strategically it represented a sound policy. 61

In his public statements President Johnson spoke against apartheid. To mark the third anniversary of the


61. Ibid., pp.190-201.
founding of the Organization of African Unity he invited a group of African ambassadors to the White House. On the occasion he made his first major presidential address in American history devoted exclusively to African questions. In his speech Johnson strongly stated his aversion for "the narrow minded and outmoded policy which in some parts of Africa permits the few to rule at the expense of many". But the actual situation was much different from words. The New York Times made it clear in an editorial:

For the present, Washington is certain to resist any African demands for sanctions or force against Pretoria. The United States is trying rather to persuade South Africa that it is on a long run collision course with most of the rest of the world and that only a change in its racial policies ... can avert that crash.[63]

By 1968 indecision and indecisiveness tended to generate spontaneous hypocrisy regarding American policy. The arms embargo had proven to be ineffective. American equipment continued to be exported to South Africa throughout the nineteen sixties with or without the knowledge of the Department of Commerce. [64]

Goldberg, the American ambassador to the United Nations, reiterated in December 1967 that the United States had scrupulously adhered to the terms of the arms embargo. Yet, he said that South Africa was receiving large quantities of modern and sophisticated weapons. He wanted the critics of the United States to direct themselves to those countries who violated the embargo. 65

If the Johnson administration made remarkably little progress this was largely because it never resolved in its own mind whether to influence the process through concessions or sanctions. The Americans were trapped by the ambiguities of their own position for they had no wish to see the Blacks challenge White supremacy by launching a struggle that would merely invite further repression and render their own noninterventionist posture even more contentious. 66 American policy had lost much of its credibility because it had held out hope for more than it had in the event been able or willing to deliver. Often the promise of brave words was extravagant and unwise, but what was noticed was that it had not been accompanied by


66. Christopher Coker, n.64, p.8.
congruent acts. The United States seemed to say one thing and do another. 67

The theoreticians of the New Frontier and the Great Society believed in linking liberal policies at home with liberal policies abroad. They were apt to identify the blacks and the poor within the borders of the United States with those of the Third World nations overseas; conversely they were inclined to associate white regimes in Africa with the worst features of Middle America, with all its real or supposed privileges and prejudices.[68]

But these grandiose programmes could not in any manner bring concrete change in American policy towards South Africa. By the end of the nineteen sixties the United States was not able to influence the South African government in any manner to change its racial policies. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations both attempted in a half hearted manner to side with Third World nations in criticizing South Africa but they did not go beyond the rhetoric to bring words closer to reality.

In retrospect it can be seen that the United States began showing greater interest in South Africa commensurate with its role as a superpower, only in 1945.

67. Arnold Rivkin, n.27, p.111.
68. Peter Duignan and L.H. Gann, n.3, p.294.
Until then its interests were non political. The foreign policy objectives in the postwar period were related to the overall American interest of containing communism and denying the Soviet Union a stronghold in areas like Southern Africa. To a great extent the policies of its European allies guided American policy. The Eisenhower administration's policy was a middle of the road one. American policy took a slight change for the better with Kennedy's coming to the White House. But as mentioned above no significant measures except the voluntary arms embargo of 1963 were taken. The New Frontier and the Great Society remained dreams. Vietnam was the major American preoccupation obscuring almost all other foreign policy issues. Southern Africa still remained low on the list of American priorities.