

BOOK REVIEW

South Africa: Time Running Out. Study Commission on United States Policy Toward Southern Africa. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981; pp. 517.

This report was prepared by a commission convened by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1978. The commission was composed of academic administrators, corporate executives, foundation heads, and a labor official, and of the three-member advisory body to the commission, two were executives of transnational corporations. The report has two goals: to create a policy framework based on United States interests in the South African context, and to serve as a resource for the general reader and specialist.

The commission defines five main United States interests in regard to South Africa and argues that these interests would be better protected by gradual rather than violent change. It believes that "whatever the South African government does to reinforce the status quo, black forces outside the country will eventually alter it"¹; however, they do not have sufficient strength to do so now, and there is still time to negotiate with minimum bloodshed. United States interests do not necessitate, in the commission's view, a fundamental restructuring of South Africa that would give equal political access to all people. Rather, it believes that blacks can be appeased by "a genuine share in political power," which is not necessarily irreconcilable to the whites' refusal of a "winner take all form of majority rule."²

The report covers the internal workings of the country, South Africa's relations with the rest of the world, and United States/South Africa policy. The first section provides an historical and political introduction. The discussion of the apparatus of apartheid and civil liberties is in depth; the beginning student of South Africa learns that it is not racism per se that distinguishes South Africa from the rest of the world, but that the racism is legalized and supported by government power.

The coverage of other issues, such as race, sex, and class demographics, is not adequate. For example, the book contains a series of statements by individual South Africans of all races on their perceptions of the country. Yet of the 19 statements, 7 of the people are white and less than half are African, although Africans account for 72% of the total population.³ Two-thirds of the statements are by men. The only black woman mentioned by name in the rest of the text is Winnie Mandela, who is described as "wife of . . .," so that aside from cursory references to women's

activity in the anti-pass campaigns in the early and mid-twentieth century the reader gleans virtually no knowledge that African women have been central figures in the struggle against apartheid. Most of the people interviewed, including the Africans, are professional or from middle-class backgrounds. Only one migrant worker speaks; and there are no statements by factory or mine workers, domestic workers or women in the homelands.

Discussion of South Africa's external military activity is sparse. Section 2, "The Wider Stage," spends more time discussing South Africa and the communist world than it does South Africa in Africa. Although the first chapter mentions that after World War Two the United Nations turned down South Africa's bid to absorb Southwest Africa (Namibia), there are only nominal references to Namibia until the two-page discussion of the current situation 300 pages later. This discussion falls under the chapter "The United States and South Africa" rather than the chapter "South Africa in Africa." The South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) is mentioned in the discussion on the USSR's involvement in southern Africa because it receives funding from the USSR. It is described only as "the group conducting guerilla warfare in Namibia." This limited and fragmented discussion of one of the critical regions in southern Africa would make it difficult for the nonspecialist to discern the major issues and actors in the Namibian struggle for liberation. South Africa's 1975-76 military activity in Angola is mentioned briefly as a "foray" by a "small expeditionary force" of 1,500-2,000 troops. However, in February 1976 South African Defense Minister Botha admitted that the troops numbered 4,000-5,000.⁴ Such brief references to external military operations obscure South Africa's ongoing campaign of destabilization against neighboring states.

The commission's policy objectives and recommendations center around three concerns: strategic, economic, and humanitarian. The commission's points on the strategic importance of South Africa to the United States are well-taken. Evidence is given that South Africa is not as important strategically to the United States as the South African government would want us to believe. For example, South Africa holds that it is protecting southern Africa against communism, however the commission suggests that the government's extremist actions may actually be pushing blacks towards the communist powers. The commission feels there is a high likelihood that any government in South Africa would be interested in United States trade and investment, a realistic assessment, given that countries such as Zimbabwe, Angola, and China are all receptive to business with United States firms. Thus, a number of the commission's suggestions revolve around decreasing United States dependence on this volatile country, particularly in minerals, through such means as assisting in the development of other southern states and

increasing trade with Zimbabwe.

To make clear its commitment against apartheid, the commission suggests that the United States government should broaden the arms and nuclear embargoes. In the recommendations for corporations, however, sanctions and trade embargoes are dismissed as largely ineffective. The report states: "An oil embargo . . . has not seriously curtailed South Africa's access to oil but has spurred the development of oil production from the country's abundant coal reserves."⁵ Yet it does not state that coal-to-oil production is largely a result of assistance from one United States firm, Fluor Corporation.⁶ That situation only demonstrates the futility of United States government statements and policies that are not backed up by economic actions.

The constructive engagement strategy for corporations which the commission recommends will have little or no impact on apartheid. In fact, the American Committee on Africa has pointed out that Citibank has already used the commission's suggestions to defend its \$250 million loan to the South African government. While allegedly a loan for "improving housing for Black and Coloured communities," part of the new housing was simply to relocate people after the international community learned that their settlements had been knocked down by government bulldozers.⁷

The call for continued United States investment and for political reform but not necessarily universal franchise belie the commission's humanitarian concerns. But statements of opposition to apartheid are politically practical and economically profitable. As the commission itself states, the United States will "accumulate political capital with a more representative South African government" if it appears to promote peaceful change by constructive engagement."⁸

The commission professes to espouse a path between two extremes, apartheid on the one hand and terrorist violence on the other. At first glance this may appear realistic compared to the confrontational stance that the Reagan administration initially adopted, which has only alienated other African states (such as its refusal to recognize Angola). A closer examination of the commission's recommendations, however, seriously calls into question their supposedly "centrist" position. Although taking a firm stance against petty apartheid and effectively challenging South Africa's view of its own strategic importance, the commission's economic policy recommendations amount to a *carte blanche* for continued United States investments. In essence, therefore, the commission's suggestions support the status quo. Its recommendation of continued United States investment is, in fact, a vote of confidence for apartheid.

As a resource book, the report presents a highly debatable

view on South Africa and should be used critically, and only in conjunction with other works. Moderation and maximization of interests within a nonviolent framework are the main themes of this book, and moderation is what it seeks from the reader. For readers with little background on South Africa, it may well succeed in promoting a moderate view by its seemingly objective presentation. However, a too moderate view of South Africa's well-known political and military excesses can be dangerous. The obvious give away is that there can be no objectivity regarding the brutalization of a people and that it is impossible to compromise on freedom.

NOTES

¹Text, p. xxiv.

²Ibid.

³"South Africa Fact Sheet," *Southern Africa Perspectives*, The Africa Fund, February 1981, p. 1.

⁴"Angola Chronology," *Southern Africa Perspectives*, The Africa Fund, 12 February 1976, p. 4.

⁵Text, p. 420.

⁶"The Sullivan Principles: A Critical Look at the U.S. Corporate Role in South Africa," *Southern Africa Perspectives*, The Africa Fund, January 1981, p. 3.

⁷ACO Action News, No. 11, Winter 1981, p. 2.

⁸Text, p. 412.

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