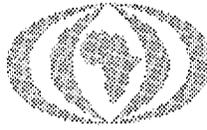


THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

National Headquarters:

JAN SMUTS HOUSE
P.O. Box 31596
Braamfontein
(Johannesburg)
2017 Transvaal
Tel. (011) 39-2021/2/3
Cables: "Insintaff" Johannesburg



Brief Report No. 28

BRANCHES:
Cape Town
Witwatersrand
Durban
Eastern Province
Pretoria
Stellenbosch
Pietermaritzburg
Border
Transkei
SWA/Namibia

SOME GENERAL IMPRESSIONS OF CURRENT U.S. POLICY TOWARDS SOUTH AFRICA

Note: These brief impressions are based on a recent two-week study tour of the United States by a representative group of South Africans (sponsored by the SA Institute of International Affairs, in co-operation with the World Peace Foundation of Boston), and particularly on the visit to Washington D.C. where the group met senior Administration officials, Senators and Congressmen. (The group also had discussions with a wide cross-section of Americans in other sectors of society during visits to Boston, New York and Atlanta.)

This brief report on American policy (and not on American attitudes generally) is by Mr. John Barratt, Director General of the SA Institute of International Affairs, who was leader of the South African group. It is not intended to reflect the views of the group as a whole.

A dominant impression was the confusion in American foreign policy generally, with the sense of a lack of consistent policy direction. This was admitted by most Americans, including apologists for President Carter, although the latter tended to excuse it on the grounds of the complexity and magnitude of the international issues currently being faced and to deny that the President's leadership was seriously at fault. (There is the same sense of confusion and lack of direction in domestic policy.)

The unresolved foreign policy issues, about which there is currently so much concern and considerable pessimism in the U.S., include, at the top of the list, relations with the Soviet Union, focussed on the question of Afghanistan; Iran and the plight of the American hostages; the weakness of the Western alliance and the reluctance of European governments to follow President Carter's lead; the deadlock in the Israeli/Egyptian negotiations following the euphoria of the Camp David agreement, and the differences with the present Israeli Government over the Palestinian/West Bank question; the problem of the large number of Cuban refugees; the general political unrest in the Caribbean and Central America, threatening continued U.S. influence in the region; and the continuing world energy, economic and monetary problems. There are grounds for the argument that any American President, faced with all these serious problems at once, would be in trouble. But the widely held perception of President Carter

is that he seems incapable of making progress on any one of these issues and, moreover, that he tends to change course too often, instead of pursuing consistent policies.

The confusion and uncertainty about American foreign policy is aggravated by the fact that this is a Presidential election year and by the length of the election process which began in January and which will last to the beginning of November - with a possible further period of inaction until January 1981, if a new President is elected. It is inevitable in an election year that the President and his advisers will take into account, more than at any other time, the possible domestic political repercussions of any foreign policy decision, with a constant reading of public opinion polls to determine how the voters are reacting. This does not make the development of consistent policies - domestic or foreign - any easier.

In the context of the above overriding and unresolved foreign policy concerns, policy towards Africa generally has a very low priority. This applies even to Southern Africa at present, although there is more underlying concern about Southern African questions than about any other region in Africa. While the White House is overwhelmed by more immediate and pressing issues for the United States, the making of policy towards Southern Africa is largely left to the officials directly concerned in the State Department (together with the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, headed by Ambassador Don McHenry).

It is probably fair to say that relations with Africa have in general improved under the Carter Administration, at least relative to the position under the previous Administration and to the standing of the Soviet Union in Africa. In the latter regard, the Soviet Union has had some setbacks, for instance in the Zimbabwe settlement.

Although the United States has benefitted from the end of the conflict in Zimbabwe, the Carter Administration contributed only marginally to the settlement. In the rest of Southern Africa American policy has not yet achieved very much. On Namibia, American initiatives in the settlement negotiations since 1977 did show some initial success, but the negotiations now appear stalemated. With regard to South Africa itself, the Carter Administration tried to adopt a more active and influential policy, but there now seems to be a fairly wide recognition in Washington (amounting sometimes to a sense of frustration) that there is little the United States can effectively do to influence changes in South Africa.

The almost missionary zeal of the Human Rights advocates in the early period of the Carter Administration seems now to have been largely dissipated - as a result perhaps of the lack of world-wide impact of this policy and the impracticability of translating these ideals into implementable policies for many differing cases throughout the world.

It is ironic that, while the Carter Administration is perceived in South African Government circles as hostile, it is criticised in the U.S. by some groups for dragging its feet on action against South Africa. It has, for instance, been unwilling to support sanctions in the United Nations, has opposed stronger Congressional action in the economic field, and has resisted pressure from militant groups seeking official support for e.g. withdrawal of American companies from South Africa.

In the Congress, which is now playing a more significant role than during previous Administrations in the making of American foreign policy, African matters are likewise currently receiving low priority attention. Although there are a few "activists" on Southern Africa, particularly in the Africa Sub-Committee of the House of Representatives (which has recently been holding a series of hearings on the role of American Corporations in South Africa), they do not appear to be making a strong impression on the Congress as a whole at present, and are unlikely to be able to have new legislation on South African economic links adopted this year.

Nevertheless, in spite of this apparent low level of attention to South Africa by policy-makers and legislators, there is paradoxically a surprisingly wide degree of interest in and concern about South African developments - as reflected in the willingness of many people in the Administration and in Congress to meet with the visiting South African group. The level of information about South Africa has also become much higher in recent years. The Americans concerned with South Africa are therefore by no means uninformed on current developments which they follow very closely.

There appears to be a greater awareness now of the complexity of Southern African issues, including South Africa, and less hostility than formerly. But there is a rather widespread and disturbing degree of pessimism, and considerable disappointment is expressed that the expectations of substantive reform, aroused by the Government last year, are not being fulfilled. The argument was encountered, for instance, that the South African Government, because of the constraints imposed by its own domestic constituency, appeared unable to take the necessary steps fast enough to meet the rising demands of Blacks, and the situation could

therefore only deteriorate into confrontation. However, this pessimism was not universal among the American officials and politicians whom the South African group met, and exceptions included Ambassador Don McHenry and Mr. Andy Young (with whom the group had discussions in New York and Atlanta respectively).

The complexity of the American policy-making process - with a wide variety of inputs into the process and pressures to be accommodated - is not widely appreciated outside the U.S., especially in countries (such as South Africa) where foreign policy decisions are made by a relatively small group of people in government, with little pressure and influence from other groups. The South African group was made aware in its Washington meetings of the differences within the bureaucracy and of the various pressures from outside groups on the question of South Africa. Policy does not depend simply on the attitude of a few people in the White House or the State Department, and this means that even a change of President will not necessarily result in any fundamental change in policy towards South Africa.

It must also be added that American foreign policy tends to be crisis-oriented, and those issues not seen to be immediately critical (and which are not receiving front-page media attention) tend to be relegated to the "back-burner". In the case of Zimbabwe, for instance, American interest has declined since the achievement of independence and ending of the war. Thus the motivation to assist Zimbabwe in dealing with the problems of reconstruction and development, as promised in recent years, has largely disappeared. As a result, American aid will now be paltry compared with the sums previously mentioned. In the case of South Africa or of S.W.A./Namibia, therefore, any dramatic rise in the level of conflict could very quickly bring these issues back to the forefront of attention. The racial element, on which Americans are obviously particularly sensitive (in view of their own simmering problems in this field), also serves to maintain the South African question as a potentially serious one for policy-makers in Washington.

Finally, it should be noted that this brief report on the current Washington approach has not dealt with the question of the importance for South Africa of links with the U.S. or with what is required of South Africa to improve the currently strained relationship. Briefly stated, official policy is that the relationship will improve only if there are concrete moves towards "full political participation" of all South Africans. But the South African group received a variety of answers to the question of what would be considered as meaningful steps in that direction, the most common answer perhaps being that the steps and the final outcome must be determined by South Africans themselves.

Jan Smuts House

July, 1980