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Getting Over by Reaching Out: Lessons from the Divestment And Krugerrand Campaigns

by Williard R. Johnson

IN THIS ARTICLE I draw on my personal experience as an activist in the American anti-Apartheid movement, and as one of the founders and National Board members of TransAfrica and the founder of its Boston Chapter. I draw as well as on my background as a scholar of foreign policy and international relations in thirty-one years on the faculty of the MIT Department of Political Science. This article addresses crucially important issues about how victimized groups, such as African Americans, can protect and possibly even advance their particular if not "special" interests regarding the domestic or foreign policy of the United States, which in the past has often damaged the health and well-being of the peoples of color within the country and in the rest of the world. I am concerned to know if and how the policy interests of "peoples of color" can be defended, given that such groups are a numerical, political and socio-economic minority group in U.S. society.

In particular, we need to know if and how a sufficiently powerful constituency can be developed for the interests of the African world. How could leadership for that constituency be achieved from those most sincerely committed to its interests? How could this constituency actually have an impact on a power structure of a country that remains basically hostile to it, and over which it has no control? Logically, this would require sympathetic action among white Americans, and a willingness by them to see such interests as legitimate.[1] We will not attempt a full examination here of the requirements of "legitimacy" for such interests, but there would likely be widespread agreement among Americans that an important component would be that such interests be compatible with the security and general well-being of the society at large. Given their history, education and socialization, all but the most enlightened elements in the majority American population, that nonetheless rationally should be expected to pursue at least self-preserving policies, are yet likely to favor ones that are racist and domineering in effect, if not intent, and thus undermining of their own broader interests.

This article will argue that partial answers to these crucial questions can be derived from the experience of anti-apartheid campaigns in the U.S., especially when viewed from the vantage point of the local city and state levels. At those levels, it becomes clear that effective coalitions that cut across racial, class and ethnic cleavages were necessary, and possible.

Without such broad-based cooperation and collaboration, the campaigns would not likely have been successful. In any case, a focus on the Free South Africa Movement demonstrations at the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C. would give a thin basis for understanding the political success of the effort, and a false model for future efforts at impacting government policy by involving ethnic minority groups, especially African Americans.

Background: Building a Constituency

IN ADDRESSING these questions, we confront the famous "American Dilemma," in general, and the African American conundrum in particular.[2] As James Q. Wilson pointed out in his soon-outdated 1960 study of political traditions and styles among northern

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