

Perspectives

A personal view of the University

Human Rights

The situation in South Africa is increasingly the focus of American attention. The Afrikaaner minority government is evidently desperate, unable to deal with black aspirations. Repression has been piled on repression—all reported on front pages and network television in this country. The White House and Congress have been vying for the lead in formulating policies aimed at inducing rapid social and political evolution in that agonized area. Demonstrations outside the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C., are accepted as routine. And university communities have become centers for a debate that is growing in intensity.

Student demonstrations last spring at Syracuse, Columbia, Cornell, and other major educational institutions gained national prominence. At Syracuse, a group called the Coalition Against Racism and Apartheid set up an encampment outside the Tolley Administration Building. The principal thrust of this and other student demonstrations elsewhere was to urge universities to “divest:” to sell, from their endowment portfolios, stocks in companies that have subsidiaries or do business in South Africa.

I personally have serious reservations about the usefulness or desirability of divestment, and I suspect that some of the demonstrators here and on other campuses may be ill-informed or naive. But I cannot see how any concerned American who knows about South Africa can fail to share the demonstrators’ sense of outrage and frustration at this appalling and unconscionable violation of human rights. South Africa claims to be among the Western democracies, but three-quarters of its population have been specifically denied

political, economic, or social rights because of their racial origins. Indeed, the government holds that blacks, who may have been there for generations, are not South Africans at all: they are citizens of “homelands,” small, mostly barren pieces of territory, arbitrarily chosen by the ruling minority. Thus all blacks in South Africa, including Nobel Prize winner Bishop Desmond Tutu, are technically transient laborers, subject to deportation at the whim of the government. Small wonder that South African blacks resort increasingly to violence, and small wonder that they have won the sympathetic support of American students.

That said, it must be acknowledged that the issues involved are highly complex. The Afrikaaners are a proud and independent people who fought to maintain their existence as a community against the Zulus in the last century and the British in this one; thus, the brutal system called apartheid derives from historical concerns as well as racial and economic ones.

The questions raised by apartheid are difficult and disturbing. Where is South Africa going? Is a long, violent, and bloody confrontation the only prospect? How can it be avoided? What can the United States do peacefully to further the cause of justice and self-determination? What can or should institutions do? What are the responsibilities of a university to its students? To academic freedom? Or to humanity?

After talks with the leaders of the Coalition Against Racism and Apartheid last spring, Chancellor Melvin A. Eggers agreed to name a task force on South Africa, which I have been asked to chair. Serving with me on the committee are two other administrators, three faculty members, and three students. Our task is several-fold. According to our mandate, we are “to study the problems that this and other human rights issues present to the University,” and “to prepare a program to inform the University community

about conditions in South Africa and the ways in which individuals and institutions might advance the cause of civil justice there.”

This is, of course, a very broad mandate, and fulfilling it will be the more difficult since events in South Africa are moving at an ever accelerating rate.

We propose to bring a series of speakers to campus and to call upon SU resources to examine events in South Africa and the options individuals and institutions have in confronting this situation.

Syracuse University has also agreed to match funds raised from students, faculty, alumni, and other sources for scholarships for black South Africans. This is a very attractive undertaking, which I think is unequivocally in the interest of the University and of progress in South Africa. A fund-raising program has begun this fall, and we hope for an enthusiastic response.

Two South African students at Syracuse are already receiving support. Grace Nkosi, a junior in the College of Nursing, receives full tuition from SU. She hopes to go on to graduate school, and if she completes an M.S. degree she would be one of the very few—perhaps the only—fully qualified black teaching nurse in South Africa. Daniel Mochi, a junior in mechanical engineering, receives half of his tuition from SU and half from AIRCO, a South African subsidiary of Carrier Corporation. Both receive funds for living expenses from a U.S. government grant, administered by Aurora Associates of Washington, D.C. Students in this program are chosen by a committee headed by Bishop Tutu. Syracuse is proud to have them here, and we would be delighted to have several more.

Since the beginning of this academic year, there have been renewed demonstrations at Syracuse and other university campuses, focusing primarily on the issue of divestment. It is argued that to hold stock in a company that profits from a presence in South Africa is essentially to profit from—and thus to

endorse—the brutality of apartheid. If nothing more, the selling of such holdings would be an important moral statement and an indication of our thoroughly justified indignation.

I find this argument less than convincing. Syracuse University’s position, since a study done by Joseph Julian in 1978, has been to hold stock in companies doing business in South Africa *only* if they are signatories to the “Sullivan Principles,” a series of requirements established by the Rev. Leon Sullivan as to how American firms should conduct themselves there. These principles include equality of facilities, promotion and education of blacks, and active public opposition to the oppressive legislative system called apartheid.

Companies so engaged would appear to be working directly counter to the thrust of apartheid. Indeed, as this is written, the South African business community and American firms in South Africa have taken the lead in pressing the government to dismantle apartheid legislation and to move toward full political participation for South Africa’s black majority. In these circumstances American firms would appear to be playing a benign role, which it would be counterproductive to discourage. The question as to whether a moral statement is worthwhile, even if its impact is other than intended, deserves careful consideration.

In examining how institutions—this one in particular—should respond to apartheid, our committee hopes to perform an educational function for the University as well as for ourselves. The task force will in some measure serve as a conduit for the views of the University community; but our report and recommendations should reflect a thorough and profound examination of the issues involved. If in conducting that examination we can broaden the understanding of South Africa’s agony among students, faculty, alumni, and others, we can consider our efforts successful.

—Goodwin Cooke

Goodwin Cooke, vice president for international affairs at Syracuse University, served as U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Central Africa.