THE SIN OF OMISSION:
THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH AFRICA IN THE NIXON YEARS

by Eric J. Morgan

This thesis examines relations between the United States and South Africa during Richard Nixon’s first presidential administration. While South Africa was not crucial to Nixon’s foreign policy, the racially-divided nation offered the United States a stabilizing economic partner and ally against communism on the otherwise chaotic post-colonial African continent. Nixon strengthened relations with the white minority government by quietly lifting sanctions, increasing economic and cultural ties, and improving communications between Washington and Pretoria. However, while Nixon’s policy was shortsighted and hypocritical, the Afrikaner government remained suspicious, believing that the Nixon administration continued to interfere in South Africa’s domestic affairs despite its new policy relaxations. The Nixon administration concluded that change in South Africa could only be achieved through the Afrikaner government, and therefore ignored black South Africans. Nixon’s indifference strengthened apartheid and hindered liberation efforts, helping to delay black South African freedom for nearly two decades beyond his presidency.
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EJM
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For Alan R. Booth
One sin, I know, another doth provoke.

—William Shakespeare

It is the shadows rather than the substance of things
that moves the hearts, and sway the deeds, of statesmen.

—George Kennan
On a sunny summer morning in the Transkei, a rabbit slowly made his way along a winding dirt road in search of a patch of shade to rest his weary body. The rabbit was very tired and thirsty, but the low veld was nearly barren in South Africa’s driest season, and so the rabbit had no choice but to continue on. In the distance, a sly fox was busy constructing a faux tar and turpentine rabbit, which he named “Tar Baby,” to ensnare his old enemy. Brer Fox had relentlessly pursued his nemesis Brer Rabbit for ages, but the hare had always eluded him. This morning, Brer Fox thought, would be different; this time he would outsmart and catch Brer Rabbit. The fox finished his masterpiece, placing an old hat on the Tar Baby’s head, and hid behind a nearby rock to watch his trap unfold.

Brer Rabbit approached the Tar Baby, and was happy to see him.

“Good morning, friend,” Brer Rabbit said. “A hot day we have today. You wouldn’t happen to know where a tired rabbit could find a bit of water and perhaps some shade to take a small nap, would you?”

The Tar Baby did not reply, his sticky head slumped under the old farmer’s hat.

Brer Rabbit, insulted and short-tempered, said, “if you don’t take off that hat and give me an answer, I’m going to bust you open.”

Again, the Tar Baby did not reply. Frustrated, Brer Rabbit punched the Tar Baby in the chest, his hand becoming submerged deep into the tar trap.

Brer Rabbit became very angry after this and said, “if you don’t let me go, I’ll hit you again.” Tar Baby, of course, did not reply, and Brer Rabbit proceeded to get his second hand stuck in the Tar Baby, and eventually both of his feet. At his wit’s end, Brer Rabbit butted his head into the Tar Baby and became totally trapped. Brer Fox watched the episode with pleasure, and emerged from behind the rock to admire his work.

“Hello, Brer Rabbit,” the fox said. “You appear to be quite stuck this morning.” The fox fell to the ground, laughing. “I expect you’ll take dinner with me this time, Brer Rabbit. I’ve made a lovely rabbit stew, and I won’t take no for an answer.”
Richard Milhous Nixon’s South Africa policy earned the dubious nickname of “Tar Baby” after the fable of Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit. Like Brer Rabbit, the Nixon administration became trapped—immersed in a shortsighted, hypocritical foreign policy that strengthened apartheid and undermined black South Africans and their struggle for equality. The United States became attached to the white minority government and engaged in a racist and astigmatic policy that would soon prove disastrous as liberation movements gained momentum across southern Africa. Once the Nixon administration chose to embrace Tar Baby, United States foreign policy remained affixed to the oppressive Afrikaners for the next fifteen years, doing little to help black South Africans achieve freedom.
Besides the sin of omission, America has often been positively guilty of working in the interest of the minority regime to the detriment of the interests of black people. America’s foreign policy seems to have been guided by a selfish desire to maintain an imperialistic stranglehold on this country irrespective of how the blacks were made to suffer.

—Steve Biko

The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them; that’s the essence of inhumanity.

—George Bernard Shaw

The conspicuous monolith of Table Mountain dominates the skyline of Cape Town, South Africa’s largest city. Cape Town is the gateway to Robben Island, the former prison where thousands of black political dissidents, including Robert Sobukwe, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, and Nelson Mandela, were incarcerated for their opposition to apartheid. The boat ride to Robben Island from the beautiful and newly renovated Victoria and Alfred Waterfront lasts half an hour, and Table Mountain remains visible even a mile off the shore of Cape Town. The mountain often symbolized two things to Robben Island prisoners. It represented the literal freedom that, for blacks, could not be realized on either the island prison or mainland; freedom, like Table Mountain, was a distant entity that could only be glimpsed from afar. Table Mountain also embodied the white Afrikaner government, the formidable, unmovable force behind apartheid—a system of legal racial separation in South Africa from 1948 to 1994.

Apartheid was a complicated entity whose origins are difficult to pinpoint. It developed over centuries of British colonization, increased Afrikaner resilience to subjugation, and from an inherent racism evident in the earliest European inhabitants in southern Africa. In 1660, Jan Van Riebeeck, the leader of the first Dutch settlers who first landed at the Cape of Good Hope in the name of the Dutch East India Company, planted a bitter almond hedge to separate his people

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from black Khoikhoi cattle herders.³ Van Riebeeck instructed his people to use the Khoikhoi for trade purposes, but to otherwise not interact with them. Thus, the segregation of blacks and exploitation of their resources began early on.⁴ At its most basic level, apartheid to the white minority population was a belief in Afrikaner nationalism and a pre-destination to reorder society for the betterment of all people, including blacks, who Afrikaners viewed as culturally, socially, and intellectually inferior. But apartheid was more than pure racial prejudice. It was also a struggle to control the fate of a divided nation and to protect the divine right of Afrikaners.⁵ The black struggle, then, was a dual one: to both reach the mythical mountain of liberation and to transform the hearts and minds of the intransigent South African government and its white citizens.

Thousands of tourists from around the globe visit Robben Island each year to pay homage to the struggle against apartheid. In July 2002, I was among them. As a hundred of us gathered in a former cell and imagined what life had been like in one of the world’s most notorious prisons, our guide—a former resistance leader—surveyed where we came from. South Africans, British, Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders, and even Brazilians were represented in great numbers. I, however, was the lone American in the room, a glaring symbol of the United States’ continued neglect of South Africa and the African continent as a whole. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the American government was often, as Black Consciousness father Steve Biko wrote, guilty of the sin of omission. The Nixon administration, like those before and after it, practiced a policy of benevolent indifference toward the issue of apartheid while strengthening economic, cultural, and military relations with the Afrikaner government. This indifference and neglect, however benign, actually helped to strengthen apartheid and further entrench the United States with the Afrikaner government. Change, the Nixon administration believed, would only be possible through the white minority government. This belief shaped policy, and the Nixon administration abandoned the moral issues surrounding apartheid and focused instead on strategic interests and concerns of stability. Indifference prevailed in Nixon’s South Africa policy, and the administration believed this was the most

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⁵ Ibid., 31.
effective way to bring change to a racially-torn nation. But indifference is akin to silence and as Alan Paton, South Africa’s greatest writer, stated, “nothing is ever quiet, except for fools.”

“The Sin of Omission” examines relations between the United States and South Africa during Richard Nixon’s first presidential administration from 1969 to 1973. Its focus is the “Tar Baby” option of National Security Study Memorandum 39, which became the Nixon administration’s official policy toward southern Africa. Like Brer Rabbit’s sticky encounter, the Tar Baby policy was a trap and the United States quickly became stuck—immersed in a myopic, hypocritical policy with severe implications for future liberation efforts in South Africa.

This project does many things. It explores personalities and bureaucratic politics in the Nixon administration. It also examines the importance of race, stability, the Third World, raw materials, and communism in American foreign policy during the détente years of the Cold War. Finally, the project examines South African foreign policy and its impact on the United States. This thesis is, I believe, the first American work on United States relations with South Africa during the Nixon years to examine government documents from South African archives. In this respect, this project is unique as it offers an international, multi-archival perspective of United States-South African relations during the Nixon presidency. My ultimate goal is to illustrate the complicated relationship between two nations with similar racial dilemmas during the détente years of the Cold War.

The historiography of United States relations with South Africa during the Nixon presidency is overwhelmingly critical of Nixon’s policy. Scholars have condemned the hypocritical words and actions that appeared to bring the United States closer to the overtly racist Afrikaner government than ever before. But top-secret documents from South Africa reveal a different opinion from the Afrikaner government, which believed otherwise. While Nixon’s South Africa policy was hypocritical and brought the United States into a difficult relationship with the Afrikaner government, the relationship was not as close as previously believed.

Relatively little has been written on Nixon and South Africa. Scholars of American foreign relations, like the government leaders they study, have also largely ignored South Africa. Those pieces that do exist have not explored South African sources. Of the more important works on this topic, The Kissinger Study of Southern Africa: National Security Study Memorandum 39, edited by Mohammed A. El-Khawas and Barry Cohen, offers the full text of

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6 Alan Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 190.
the administration’s policy options, which are discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. The Afrikaner government, El-Khawas and Cohen argue, was an ally that the United States could trust and that would help preserve Western interests. Improved relations between the United States and South Africa, El-Khawas and Cohen believe, would secure United States economic interests in the region—mainly raw materials such as uranium and chromium.7

Roger Morris, the National Security Council aide who was chiefly responsible for the drafting of National Security Study Memorandum 39 and the “Tar Baby” option, believes that the most important factors in the administration’s decision-making was the overwhelming disinterest about Africa, lack of experts in the area, and terrible lack of foresight. In his Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy, Morris writes, “the worst effect of such foreign policy was to deprive the United States of a chance to stop or at least slow its own heedless descent, along with the other Western powers and the Africans, into the coming disaster of a race war.”8 Anthony Lake, another former National Security Council aide, writes that American investment in southern Africa—$650 million by the mid-1960s—drove government policy, as did the constant fear of communist infiltration. A strong South African military, Lake contends, was essential to regional security.9

Thomas Borstelmann argues in his study, The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena, that domestic implications motivated the Nixon administration’s policies. “Nixon’s Southern strategy,” Borstelmann writes, “turned out to have an international reach, incorporating whites in southern Africa as well as the American South. The NSC acknowledged how racial issues crossed national borders.”10 While domestic implications did influence Nixon’s foreign policy, as Borstelmann argues, other factors—including stability and national interest—carried more weight. Race plays an important part in Melvin Small’s argument in The Presidency of Richard Nixon. Nixon, Small contends, was uninterested in African affairs, and was essentially racist. “On one occasion early in his tenure,” Small writes, “the president ‘pointed out that there has never been an adequate black nation, and

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8 Morris, Uncertain Greatness, 120.
they are the only race of which this is true’.“¹¹ William Minter, in his *King Solomon’s Mines Revisited: Western Interests and the Burdened History of Southern Africa*, also believes that economic forces greatly affected American policy. Economic ties eclipsed any political or moral differences between the two nations. American policy toward South Africa during the Nixon years, Robert Kinloch Massie argues, was an extension of racism that continued to permeate throughout American society in the wake of the civil rights movement. The American government, corporations, and public, Massie believes, struggled with race both at home and abroad. Many Americans were still not comfortable with blacks in power, and perceived the white Afrikaner government sympathetically.¹²

Apartheid in South Africa began after the National Party won a surprise victory in the 1948 national election. Led by D.F. Malan, the National Party defeated the incumbent government headed by Prime Minister Jan Smuts. Smuts favored easing the *de facto* segregation that had gradually increased throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. But growing white fears of blacks had escalated to frenetic levels by the spring of 1948, and Smuts called for an election to determine the direction of the country’s future. Urban whites worried about losing their jobs to lower-paid blacks, and Afrikaner farmers feared a severe labor shortage as massive numbers of blacks began to migrate from the countryside and into the industrial centers of Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Port Elizabeth. Exploiting these fears, the National Party campaigned on a platform of *swart gevaar*, or “black peril,” promising to send blacks out of the cities and back to the country in the hopes of creating a true Afrikaner homeland and a self-regenerating labor reservoir for white enterprise. Afrikaner nationalism swelled in the aftermath of the Second World War. Many National Party elites, including future Prime Minister B.J. Vorster, had been educated in Germany in the 1930s and embraced Nazi ideology—racial purification and white supremacy. By 1948, whites appeared ready to separate themselves from the black majority—over eighty-eight percent of the population. After the National Party triumph in May 1948, D.F. Malan rejoiced, “for the first time, South Africa is our own. May God grant that it always remains our own.”¹³ It would remain so for the next forty-five years.

During the early days of apartheid, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations were more concerned with fighting communism than racism. The United States was dependent on South African raw materials for the production of nuclear weapons. Securing South Africa’s allegiance and its resources—gold, chromium, vanadium, the ferrochrome metals manganese, the vital platinum group, and the non-ferrochrome metals, among other—for the purposes of national defense, was more important than attempting to end apartheid. In order to increase its nuclear arsenal and hinder similar efforts in the Soviet Union, the United States required a monopoly on crucial raw materials, and thus needed to maintain stable relations with white minority governments in southern Africa.\footnote{Thomas Borstelmann, \textit{Apartheid’s Reluctant Uncle: The United States and Southern Africa in the Early Cold War} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 92.} In the international arena, the Cold War’s early days corresponded with those of apartheid, but apartheid received little attention in the United Nations; communism dominated the diplomatic arena. The United States needed as many allies in the war against communism and the Soviet Union as it could gather, and in the bi-polar world of the Cold War, the Afrikaner government was a strong, steadfast defender of capitalism.

Apartheid stayed in the shadows of the Cold War until 1960, when the Sharpeville massacre shocked the world. On March 21, 1960, Robert Sobukwe and the Pan-African Congress, the African National Congress’s largest rival, launched a protest against pass laws. All blacks and colored—those of mixed races—in South Africa were required to carry passes and had restrictions on movement placed upon them. If one were caught without a pass, he or she could be immediately arrested. Sobukwe and thousands of Pan-African Congress members marched through Sharpeville, a suburb of Johannesburg, to the police station, where they were met by armed police officers. The police opened fire on the crowd, killing sixty-seven and wounding one hundred and eighty-six, most of whom were shot in the back.\footnote{Thompson, \textit{A History of South Africa}, 210.} Following the shootings, the world community was in an uproar. The United Nations condemned the South African government, foreign companies and governments pulled their investments out of South Africa, and the segregated nation appeared more volatile and on the verge of civil war than ever before.\footnote{Richard Bissel, \textit{South Africa and the United States: The Erosion of an Influence Relationship} (New York: Praeger, 1982), 9} A few officials in the United States Department of State, without approval from their supervisors, issued a statement regretting the results of the Sharpeville incident and urging the South African government to address black grievances. This was a kind gesture and South
African blacks were tremendously grateful. Secretary of State Christian Herter and President Dwight D. Eisenhower, however, were livid. Eisenhower apologized to the South African ambassador and reiterated his support for the Afrikaner government and the United States’ economic commitment to the nation.17

In November 1960, John F. Kennedy defeated vice-president Richard M. Nixon in one of the closest presidential elections in American history. While the United States and the Soviet Union battled each other in the Cold War of the early 1960s, blacks in both southern Africa and the United States fought their own war against racism. The Kennedy administration hoped to practice a policy of containment in southern Africa and America, isolating racism as much as possible.18 But in terms of actual policy, the Kennedy administration did little more than publicly condemn apartheid. By 1961, Prime Minister Hendrick Verwoerd had succeeded D.F. Malan as prime minister and was extremely popular. South Africa recovered from the Sharpeville massacre with increased authority, and with this power, Verwoerd strengthened apartheid during his premiership. He made political dissent illegal, banned the African National Congress and other insurgent groups, and began a massive sabotage campaign against Nelson Mandela and other resistance leaders. With the ANC and most leaders forced underground, the Afrikaner government and its apartheid system were formidable.19 Kennedy saw no alternative to the Afrikaner government, as he believed that Mandela and other black leaders were being influenced by communism and were therefore enemies to the United States.20 While the Kennedy presidency began with a commitment to end racism in southern Africa, his administration resorted to conservative Cold War politics and did very little to influence the powerful, growing South African government. Whatever hopes Kennedy had for change in southern Africa, they were cut short when he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas in November 1963.

Lyndon Baines Johnson succeeded Kennedy, and his administration battled racism in the United States. The Johnson administration saw passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which mandated equality in public accommodations, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which guaranteed the right to register to vote to African-Americans. But despite the legislation, the

18 Ibid., 147.
19 Thompson, A History of South Africa, 189.
20 Borstelmann, The Cold War and the Color Line, 156.
United States became increasingly racially polarized throughout the 1960s. 1968 marked one of the most violent years in American history, with protests of the Vietnam War and racial discrimination dominating the political landscape. South Africa also became further polarized, as the Afrikaner government, now led by Prime Minister Balthazar John [B.J] Vorster, increased its stranglehold over the black majority and created a growing divide between blacks and whites. Additionally, the Rivonia Trial of 1963 resulted in the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and numerous other resistance leaders. By the middle of the decade, the ANC was tired, underground, and powerless. The Johnson administration believed, though, that moderate change in South Africa was possible, and advocated alterations in black education and labor.21 But the Johnson administration was never able to stabilize its policy, as it could not decide whether sanctions or concessions were the best way for change to occur in South Africa. Ultimately, the Johnson administration publicly abhorred apartheid but did little to change it; the Vietnam War and domestic clashes dominated the second term of LBJ’s presidency, and South Africa became a very low priority.

By 1968, Richard Nixon was ready to return to the national stage. Nixon campaigned for president in 1968 on a platform of law and order and a promise to end the war in Vietnam. Nixon’s Southern Strategy, which capitalized on the increased racism and white resentment of African-Americans, paid off, and in another of the closest elections in American history, Nixon prevailed over Hubert Humphrey and independent segregationist candidate George Wallace. Nixon came to office determined to distance his administration from his predecessors, especially in the realm of foreign policy. South Africa would not become one of Nixon’s largest foreign policy priorities, but the administration’s policy decisions were important in their marked ambivalence and shortsighted nature. Like the administrations before his, Nixon helped to strengthen apartheid and continued the United States’ neglect of Africa and issues of human rights. Soon the United States would become, like Brer Rabbit, stuck on the side of the oppressor, the unmovable monolith of apartheid.

CHAPTER TWO
Foresight and Folly

[Tar Baby] was a disaster, naïve in concept, practically impossible for the government to execute, and thus a ready cover for pursuing the most reactionary and shortsighted U.S. interests in the region.

—Roger Morris²²

The influence of any nation, however powerful, in the internal affairs of another is severely limited. The idea that the United States could bring about fundamental change in another society is without foundation. We certainly cannot do it in Southern Africa. If change comes, it must come primarily from within.

—David Newsom²³

Arthur Ashe dominated Dick Crealy in the finals of the 1970 Australian Open, prevailing on the sodden courts of Sydney in straight sets, 6-4, 9-7, 6-2. Despite the drizzling rain that intermittently clouded his eyeglasses, Ashe needed only eighty-four minutes to defeat Crealy and become just the fourth American to win the Open, the first since Dick Savitt’s victory in 1951.²⁴ Two days after winning his second career Grand Slam tournament, Ashe, who one year earlier helped to form the Association of Tennis Professionals to provide prize money for competitors, was the top-ranked American tennis professional in the world, on his way to becoming the first player in history to earn $100,000 in prize money in a single year, and had suddenly become an “international storm center” in the debate over racism and the policies of apartheid.²⁵ While Ashe enjoyed great success on the court in 1970, he did not find victory as easy in his off-the-court struggles with the Republic of South Africa.

After a conversation with South African tennis player Cliff Drysdale in early January of 1970 about the inaugural South African Open, which would soon become “one of the half-dozen top tournaments in the world,” Ashe decided to apply for a visa to enter the country for the

²² Morris, Uncertain Greatness, 111.
Johannesburg tournament that fall. Drysdale, a close friend of Ashe, was hoping “to attract a stellar field” to the new tournament, but was cynical of Ashe’s chances to get into the country.

“They’d never let you play,” Drysdale said to Ashe.

Ashe, puzzled, asked, “Are you serious?”

Drysdale responded, quite seriously, “Try them, you’ll see.”

Ashe sent in his visa request despite Drysdale’s reservations, and was denied, two days after his convincing Australian Open victory, for one simple reason: he was black. This rebuff began a stormy relationship between Ashe and the government of South Africa, and commenced his twenty-year campaign against apartheid. In his initial struggle over the 1970 visa denial, Ashe found an unlikely ally in his battle with South Africa: the thirty-seventh President of the United States, Richard Milhous Nixon.

At the beginning of the 1970s, apartheid in South Africa was at high tide. The major resistance groups—the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party, and the Pan-African Congress—were banned and their leaders, including Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, and Walter Sisulu, were imprisoned on Robben Island or in exile. The Afrikaner government, led by Prime Minister Balthazar John [B.J.] Vorster, was unwilling to make alterations to the stringent policies of racial separation, even to one of the most prominent athletes—and the most powerful nation—in the world. The Nixon administration, along with the United States State Department, attempted to persuade Vorster and the apartheid government to issue Ashe a visa, despite the apartheid policies and the belief that Ashe’s true motivation in traveling to South Africa was not tennis but politics.

Nixon’s interest in the Ashe visa case creates a fascinating paradox when compared with the policy decisions he approved during the controversy. He was responsible for a “partial relaxation” of economic sanctions toward South Africa and increased communications with the white minority government. And while Ashe was an American citizen, Nixon had no particular

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affection for African-Americans or their causes. African-Americans, Nixon once noted, were “just down out of the trees.”

Nixon’s “Southern Strategy,” which relied on racism and heightened white resentment of American blacks, allowed him to win all but five Southern states in the 1968 election and to secure the presidency. With similar sentiments fueling its African policy, the Nixon administration, using its realpolitik worldview in which power overshadowed morality, considered the white Afrikaner government in South Africa a strong ally—a vicious opponent of communism, a defender of capitalism, and in many ways a surrogate America—a stable institution on the otherwise chaotic continent where, Nixon commented, “there has never in history been an adequate black nation, and they are the only race of which this is true. . . . Africa is hopeless, the worst there is Liberia, which we built.”

Despite these observations, Nixon took “great personal interest” in the Ashe case, and urged the United States Ambassador to South Africa, William Rountree, to negotiate with the Afrikaner government.

Rountree, a Lyndon Johnson-era appointee who was replaced in Pretoria six months later by John Hurd, Nixon’s 1968 campaign manager in Texas, flew to Port Elizabeth at the end of January to meet and discuss the Ashe dilemma with Prime Minister Vorster. Vorster, a hard-liner who was interned by the South African government during the Second World War because of his Nazi sympathies and leadership in the radical, rightwing group Ossewa Brandwag, succeeded Hendrik Verwoerd as Prime Minister in September 1966 after Verwoerd was assassinated before a session of Parliament. At their meeting in Port Elizabeth, Ambassador Rountree urged Prime Minister Vorster to consider granting Ashe a visa as a favor to Nixon, and Vorster agonized over the decision. Vorster was most concerned about the state of relations between South Africa and the United States, which, in his mind, were not as strong as they could be, and could deteriorate in part because of the Ashe situation. The Afrikaner government was obsessed with American policy toward South Africa, constantly searching the American press for signs of Nixon’s decision on his new Africa policies, and worried that it would lose its most powerful benefactor if Nixon was “tempted to appease liberal and Negro sentiment by taking a

30 Ibid., 224.
32 Memorandum, Rountree to Nixon, folder: CO 135 South Africa, Republic of [1969-1970], box 65, Subject Files, Countries, WHCF, NPMP.
strong line” against South Africa’s apartheid policies. Ultimately Prime Minister Vorster decided against issuing Ashe a visa, despite Nixon’s pressure.

The Ashe episode illustrates the complicated and often hypocritical relations between the United States and South Africa during the Nixon administration, as well as Nixon’s own conflicted feelings about Africa. When Nixon returned from his vice-presidential trip to Africa in March of 1957, he expressed great praise for the continent and its nations. He wrote, “no one can travel in Africa, even as briefly as I did, without realizing the tremendous potentialities of this great continent. Africa is the most rapidly changing area in the world today. The course of its development, as its people continue to emerge from a colonial status and assume the responsibilities of independence and self-government, could well prove to be the decisive factor in the conflict between the forces of freedom and international communism.” While this statement was a public one, by the time of his ascension to the presidency in 1969, Nixon privately believed that Africa was hopeless; this sentiment drove his administration’s policies toward South Africa, and the ensuing “Tar Baby” plan created a difficult foreign policy quagmire.

Nixon insisted on a complete review of foreign policy alternatives when he entered office in January of 1969. National Security Study Memorandum 39 (NSSM 39) was one of sixty-one reviews of countries and regions which Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s Assistant for National Security Affairs, ordered of the Departments of State, Defense, and the Central Intelligence Agency. NSSM 39 was commissioned in April 1969 to “consider (1) the background and future prospects of major problems in [Southern Africa]; (2) alternative views of the U.S. interest in Southern Africa; (3) and the full range of basic strategies and policy options open to the United States.” The National Security Study Memorandums were often assigned to staff members simply to keep the bureaucracy busy and to give the impression that Nixon and Kissinger were interested in the opinions of other. However, unlike other parts of the world, Nixon had no clear vision for

34 Memorandum, H.L.T. Taswell to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 19 September 1969, Countries 1/33/3, Vol. 13, Archives of the South Africa Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ASAMFA), Pretoria, South Africa.
36 Peter J. Schraeder, United States Foreign Policy Toward Africa: Incrementalism, Crisis and Change (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 207.
his Africa policy, which meant that NSSM 39 would be a crucial instrument to evaluate potential policy options.

As the various policy studies began, the South Africa government watched the process with great interest, as it hoped to develop better relations with the United States under the Nixon administration then it had with the Johnson administration. Early on, South African officials were not encouraged, however, as they believed that Nixon would potentially “crack down on White governments.” In March 1969, South African Ambassador H.L.T. Taswell discussed the state of relations between the United States and South Africa with United States Secretary of State William Rogers. “We were very anxious to improve our relations with other African countries,” Taswell commented. “The more we could succeed in doing that the better would it be for us, for stability in Southern Africa, and also for the United States.” Taswell believed that the United States did not have to endorse South Africa’s apartheid policy, but “if the Americans took a strong line against us, smaller countries followed suit. By the same token if the United States were more moderate so were the smaller powers. Because of the important role the United States played in the world many other countries were inclined to follow.”

NSSM 39 was supposed to have been completed in two weeks, but took over eight months to compile because organizing policy towards southern Africa was, for Nixon’s staff, a difficult task. The creation of NSSM 39, like the policy that would follow, was a lackadaisical, muddled affair. The inexperience of Kissinger’s National Security Council (NSC) staff with Africa caused this to happen. Even if staff members had doubts, they were often silenced until it was too late for them to be voiced. Roger Morris, Winston Lord, Marshall Wright, and Kissinger himself had little or no experience with southern Africa, and they viewed relations with South Africa through the lens of the Soviet Union and the Cold War.

The perceived unimportance of Africa and the competing views on policy between the White House and the Africa Bureau of the State Department also slowed the completion of NSSM 39. David Newsom, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, believed that “Africa [was] not of major strategic importance to the U.S . . . . our interests in Africa are more

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38 “S.A. is Low on Nixon’s List,” Rand Daily Mail, 11 April 1969, USA Relations with South Africa, Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 11, ASAMFA.
39 Memorandum, H.L.T. Taswell to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 20 March 1969, USA Relations with South Africa, Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 11, ASAMFA.
41 Coker, The United States and South Africa, 59
concerned with economic relations and transit than strategic factors.”42 Roger Morris, an NSC staff member who wrote a portion of NSSM 39, was, in the worlds of a colleague, “most cynical about the moral credibility of the State Department [who] were always speaking in moral terms.” Morality had little to do with official American policy in Africa, Morris argued, as South Africa was considered a “client” state that provided regional stability, security, and an ally against communism.43 NSSM 39 would eventually produce, Morris believed, “a reasonably credible array of ‘soft’ choices as well as the harder lines . . . .these choices encompass, of course, some fundamental judgments about Africa’s importance to us, the volatility of the racial issue in world politics, the interplay of ideals and interest in foreign policy.”44 The issue of Africa’s importance would soon be debated at many levels of the bureaucracy, and many of the policy options suggested a low priority for Africa in Nixon’s foreign policy agenda despite the radical changes sweeping across the continent.

At the beginning of the 1970s, southern Africa was in chaos. In the wake of the Second World War, European nations began to transfer their colonial power to local governments after spreading their resources too thin across the globe throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. British decolonization began in its Asian territories and spread to Africa in 1957 when African nationalists of the Gold Coast, now Ghana, were granted independence. Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Gambia soon followed. In 1960, France gave up its two federations of colonies in Africa and Belgium withdrew from the Congo. That same year, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan toured Africa, which culminated in a visit to South Africa. In a speech to parliament in Cape Town, Prime Minister Macmillan applauded the “wind of change” that was dominating the African continent and told the Afrikaner government that the British would not support South Africa if it attempted to hinder black African liberation. Shortly thereafter, Great Britain transferred power to local governments in Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia. The white-minority government in Rhodesia, led by Ian Smith, declared its own independence in 1965, fearing that the British would soon transfer its colonial power to black nationalists. The world community did not recognize Smith’s regime and soon

44 Memorandum, Morris to Kissinger, 13 May 1969, folder: Africa General thru Feb 70, box 747, Country Files – Africa, NSCF, NPMP.
implemented severe sanctions upon the country; likewise, blacks began a guerilla warfare campaign against the Rhodesian government. The Portuguese faced similar armed resistance movements in their African colonies of Angola and Mozambique. By 1968, the British government had transferred power to local black Africans in Lesotho, Botswana, and Swaziland. Despite the overwhelming swell of liberation movements, South Africa continued its apartheid policy and occupancy of South West Africa, now Namibia, which was later ruled illegal by the International Court of Justice. Decolonization had begun, gained momentum, and liberation movements dominated the African political landscape of the late-1960s and early-1970s; however, the white forces of Portugal and Rhodesia resisted the winds of change, further entrenching themselves and engaging in a bloody race war. In South Africa, though, the white-minority government was a formidable force and the black struggle for freedom festered.45

Despite the discord and disarray, the review process slowly continued. By December, five policy papers had been completed and compiled into the NSSM 39 report. Portions of NSSM 39 somehow leaked at this point, a prelude to an issue that later plagued Nixon’s presidency. Issues of national security, Nixon learned, were targets for the press and leaks, however small, could impair sensitive policies.46 A delegation of professors from the Universities of Oregon and Colorado visited the State Department with intricate knowledge of Option One of NSSM 39 and put Chuck Hermann, an NSC staff member, in an awkward position with various probing questions and accusations. “You must insure that such incidents are not repeated,” Kissinger wrote to William Rogers. “I know you will agree that the NSC system cannot operate without the confidential nature of its meetings being maintained. It is particularly disturbing in such warped fashion.”47 Regardless of the lapse in security, the review process concluded in mid-December and a National Security Council meeting was set for December 17, 1969 to discuss NSSM 39, its five policy options, and the ultimate direction of the Nixon administration’s South Africa strategy.

Dean Acheson, the former Secretary of State under Harry S. Truman and architect of American Cold War containment policy, authored Option One. Kissinger praised the “Acheson

plan” for adding “a perspective that would never come from the bureaucracy.” The Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency also admired Acheson’s proposal, as it was both conservative and realistic. Acheson argued that the United States needed an autonomous foreign policy that was not influenced by the magnified morality of the United Nations and should secure South Africa’s allegiance and its resources for the purposes of national defense. The United States, Acheson contended, was dependent on South African raw materials for the production of nuclear weapons. In order to increase its nuclear arsenal and hinder the similar efforts of the Soviet Union, the United States required a monopoly on crucial raw materials, and thus needed to maintain stable relations with white minority governments in southern Africa. This was a matter of deterrence and national security, not of morality. Acheson also noted the importance of “the pronounced anti-communist policies” of South Africa, and recommended that the United States become closer with the Afrikaner government to protect its own strategic interests instead of dabbling with ineffective “moralistic reformism.” Acheson’s fears were excessively paranoid, though, as the United States would have been able to obtain these raw materials from a black government. But during of the Cold War, logic did not always prevail.

Ultimately Option One recognized that the United States would “have no significant effect on the situation” in South Africa, and advocated “expand[ing] contacts and economic, scientific, and strategic activities in white-dominated states and territories.” Policy changes would include the relaxation of sanctions and arms embargoes, the encouragement of American exports to South Africa, the cessation of economic aid to blacks, and the discouraging of insurgence and liberation movements. The South African government learned of Option One and was guardedly optimistic of its potential. “The low-key approach,” Ambassador Taswell commented, “is intended to avoid any semblance of a confrontation . . . but, at the same time, we are to understand signals reaching us as meaning that we must not hope for any endorsement of our own policies, domestic and foreign.” Nixon, South African government leaders believed, was “less likely to be swayed by idealistic, as opposed to strictly political considerations where

49 Borstelmann, Apartheid’s Reluctant Uncle, 92.
these affect national interest.”52 The Afrikaner government hoped that national interest would ultimately drive American foreign policy and help to strengthen ties between the two nations.

“Foresight and folly,” Roger Morris wrote, “were entwined at every level of the administration’s foreign policy. No single episode caught the mixture more vividly than the review of southern Africa.”53 Morris, an NSC aid who later resigned from Kissinger’s staff in protest of the 1970 Cambodian invasion that widened the Vietnam War, drafted Option Two of NSSM 39. The essence of Option Two was its conclusion that the Afrikaner government was in power “to stay,” with the only possibility of positive change coming through it, and the argument that the blacks could not realistically gain political rights through violence, which would “only lead to chaos and increased opportunities for communists.”54 Option Two advocated balancing “relations in [Africa] by compensating for—rather than abandoning—tangible interests in the white states,” lowering the profile of the United States in the United Nations, “quietly relax[ing] bilateral relations with South Africa by taking a less doctrinaire approach to mutual problems,” and making “monetary and other gestures to black states.” Ultimately Option Two hoped to “straddle the black-white division in Southern Africa” and protect American economic and strategic interests.55

An anonymous State Department critic of Option Two gave the policy its notorious moniker of “Tar Baby,” named after Joel Chandler Harris’ famous fable, “The Wonderful Tar Baby Story.” If enacted as policy, the official believed, Option Two would “mire the United States deeper on the side of the oppressors,” and like Brer Rabbit, the United States would be stuck in a precarious quagmire with few options. Tar Baby’s essential nature was hypocritical; the policy “would maintain public opposition to racial repression but relax political isolation and economic restrictions on the white states.”56 Option Two would attempt to bring change in South Africa through communication with the Afrikaner government. Instead of trying to force *de jure* de-colonization upon South Africa, the United States would attempt to straddle both sides of the struggle. Tar Baby, for example, advocated the continued enforcement of arms embargoes, but allowed the sale of equipment that could be used for either civilian or military

52 Memorandum, Taswell to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 19 September 1969, USA Relations with South Africa, Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 13, ASAMFA.
use; it would change the United States’ stance that South Africa’s occupancy of South West Africa was illegal; it would remove constraints on Export-Import Banks in South Africa and encourage American investment; and it would discourage armed insurgence movements while providing blacks with financial support. However diplomatic Tar Baby appeared on the surface, its critics foresaw a deep duplicity in the policy and a potentially disastrous future.

Option Three of NSSM 39 represented a continuation of the Johnson administration’s policies, which blended “moral overtones and diplomatic appeal.” The United States, Option Three argued, realized that the political situation in South Africa would not change in the near future, and suggested the maintenance of economic, scientific, and strategic interests in the country. At the same time, the United States would publicly abhor apartheid and limit its associations with white-ruled states. Option Three encouraged the enforcement of arms embargoes, continued opposition to apartheid in the United Nations and the global community, ambivalence with regard to investments and exports, and an on-going dialogue with insurgent groups. The Johnson policy hinged on flexibility, but ultimately became one of indifference. South African officials were often annoyed by the Johnson administration’s public condemnations of apartheid, and hoped that “the new regime at the State Department would be more sympathetic than their predecessors.” Option Three would continue the “strident tone of the past and lecturing,” but would be moderate in its actual actions. Earlier, before both were assassinated, Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. had criticized Johnson’s South African policy in light of LBJ’s progressive record on civil rights in America. “The president’s view,” R.W. Komer and Rick Haynes wrote to McGeorge Bundy, “is that since he is working to make the American Negro fully a part of American society, he doesn’t think it is at all a good idea to encourage a separate point of view on foreign policy. We don’t want an integrated domestic policy and a segregated foreign policy.” Unfortunately for Johnson, a segregated foreign policy did materialize, as South African Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd greatly strengthened apartheid from 1964 to 1968 with little protest from the Johnson administration.

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59 Report, “The Development of South-African-United States Relations Under the Nixon Administration, USA Relations with South Africa, Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 20, ASAMFA.
60 Quoted in Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, 198.
61 Ibid., 204.
Mired in the Vietnam War, the Johnson Administration did little to persuade the Afrikaner government to change its apartheid policies.

Winston Lord, an NSC staff member and graduate of Yale and Tufts who later served as ambassador to China and president of the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote the fourth alternative of NSSM 39.62 Lord’s proposal urged complete disengagement from the Afrikaner government, calling for unilateral support for the black majority in South Africa, including increased sanctions and possible military intervention.63 Support of black South Africans and the end of apartheid, Lord argued, would solidify the United States’ “international standing, particularly in Africa, on the issue of race.”64 Perhaps the most important result of Nixon’s vice-presidential visit to Africa was his recommendation for the creation of a Bureau of African Affairs in the State Department. “For too many years,” Nixon wrote in 1957, “Africa in the minds of many Americans has been regarded as a remote and mysterious continent. [The Bureau of African Affairs], properly staffed and with sufficient funds, will better equip us to handle our relationships with the countries of Africa.”65 Nixon’s African Bureau did materialize, and later became the largest supporter of Option Four of NSSM 39.

Option Four advocated the reduction or elimination of diplomatic missions in South Africa, stronger arms embargoes, the removal of all military and NASA stations from the country, the discouraging of South African investment, large economic assistance programs for black insurgence movements, and the possible use of covert military operations to end apartheid.66 “The legitimate expression of the American people should influence our foreign policy,” Lord wrote, as “we should keep ahead of public opinion rather than be caught up in a domestic controversy . . . . Our foreign policy should reflect domestic and moral imperatives.”67 Lord believed that once the Vietnam War ended, American dissidents would soon look for another issue to concentrate on. South Africa, Lord argued, offered them the perfect target. With this thought clearly in mind, Option Four suggested a tremendously progressive policy

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63 Memorandum, Robert E. Osgood to Kissinger, 21 October 1969, folder: Africa General thru Feb 70, box 747, Country Files – Africa, NSCF, NPMP.
64 Schraeder, *United States Foreign Policy Toward Africa*, 208.
67 Memorandum, Osgood to Kissinger, 21 October 1969, folder: Africa General thru Feb 70, box 747, Country Files – Africa, NSCF, NPMP.
alternative that could bring real change to South Africa. Kissinger “disagreed[d] with Lord’s policy conclusions on both practical and moral grounds,” but still appreciated that the development he anticipated was possible, although unlikely.68

The final portion of NSSM, Option Five, recommended complete isolation from South Africa, supporting neither side and dissociating from the issue of apartheid entirely. “The racial confrontation in southern Africa,” Option Five warned, “is unmanageable and potentially dangerous and will grow worse despite any efforts we might make.”69 As a result of this prediction, Option Five suggested reducing diplomatic and consular offices in South Africa, removing NASA and military tracking stations, enforcing arms embargoes, limiting aid to black groups, and discouraging of insurgent movements. Option Five would sacrifice American interests in South Africa, do nothing for either blacks or Afrikaners to help ease the racial tensions, and leave the problem to Africans.70 Option Five resembled the “Nixon Doctrine,” as it would drastically reduce the role of the United States in solving the complicated South African situation. The Nixon Doctrine, coined in 1969 after Nixon’s trip to Guam, argued that autonomous nations should be responsible for defending themselves, both internally and externally.71 Kissinger and others in the administration were intrigued with the pragmatism of Option Five; at the heart of the option’s argument was Kissinger’s crucial question of American foreign policy development, “why is it our business how they govern themselves?”72

The National Security Council meeting of 17 December 1969 discussed southern Africa and the five policy options of NSSM 39. The meeting was, Roger Morris wrote, “a fitting sequel” to the haphazard construction of NSSM 39, “and a typical cameo of foreign policy” decision-making in the Nixon Administration’s first year.73 Nixon opened the meeting declaring that the problem of South Africa was a “matter of extraordinary moral and political dimensions.”74 Secretary of State William Rogers argued that the South African issue was, in actuality, not complicated, as many of the former lawyers present at the meeting—himself, Attorney General John Mitchell, Vice President Agnew, and Nixon—had many “clients” in South Africa and a policy of closeness with the Afrikaner government was more than justified.

68 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 115.
72 Isaacson, Kissinger, 656.
73 Morris, Uncertain Greatness, 114.
74 Ibid.
The Central Intelligence Agency then presented its standard brief about the region, which was, Roger Morris later wrote, “transparently pro-white, so disdainful of black African opposition.”\(^{75}\) Kissinger followed the CIA’s report with a bland synopsis of the five options, and the personalities in the meeting battled back and forth over an area of the world about which none of them had much knowledge.

In the course of the discussion, the first, fourth, and fifth options of NSSM were dismissed. Both the “Acheson plan” and Winston Lord’s “disengagement” alternative sided far too blatantly with either the white or black side of the struggle. Either option would isolate different groups in both the bureaucracy and the public; the fifth option was also impossible to implement as policy because the United States did need certain raw materials from South Africa and the NSC meeting agreed that issues of morality could not impede issues of national interest and security. Option Three was a feasible choice—it took the moral high ground of publicly abhorring apartheid while utilizing a moderate policy pressure on the South African government—but Nixon wanted to separate his administration’s foreign policy direction from that of Lyndon Johnson’s, and so Option Three was also set aside. This left only Option Two—Tar Baby—as the most realistic policy that would privately strengthen relations with the Afrikaner government. The NSC meeting, in typical fashion, ended with no decision made. Nixon and Kissinger made the final decisions on foreign policy, and Nixon acted on Kissinger’s recommendation a few weeks later to finalize the administration’s policy on South Africa.

Ten months of disjointed efforts by various NSC staff members resulted in an important foreign policy decision. The Tar Baby option came to perfectly symbolize Richard Nixon and his administration, as it said one thing and eventually did another. In January 1970, as Arthur Ashe’s visa application was being denied despite Nixon’s personal interest in the international incident, Richard Nixon approved Option Two—the Tar Baby Option—of National Security Study Memorandum 39, ironically strengthening relations with the Afrikaner government of South Africa. The policy was now set, and the administration’s next step was to turn Tar Baby’s words into actions.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 115.
CHAPTER THREE

Our Own Interests

We had better look after our own interests where national security and international monetary matters are concerned.

—Richard Nixon

The novelty of throwing mud at South Africa has become outdated as time passed. It remains a fact that the South African economic power is starting to impress people.

—B.J. Vorster

At the California White House in San Clemente, Richard Nixon sat beside a swimming pool under the warm September sun reading “The Green Bay Tree,” The Economist’s special survey of Africa, from cover-to-cover “with absolute fascination.” During the fall of 1969, the South African government was infatuated with the southern Africa policy review process in Washington and feared that Nixon might take a harder line against the Afrikaners and apartheid. The South African government was pleased that Nixon was greatly interested in “The Green Bay Tree” article but was also wary of the piece’s influence. Norman Macrae’s essay concluded that South Africa was a potent economic force and encouraged further investment from the United States, Great Britain, and other Western powers. South Africa, Macrae believed, was the key to further development in Africa and was on the cusp of becoming one of the world’s premier industrial nations. Thus, he recommended that the Western community embrace the nation’s potential. But Macrae was also very critical of apartheid. “This plush little white community,” Macrae wrote, “must realize that it lives in a country where a great deal of human hardship is being suffered, and it must stop the present terrible trend towards a deadening of national and individual conscience.” Whether or not Nixon actually did read this article with

77 B.J. Vorster, Select Speeches ed. O. Geyser (Bloemfontein: Inch, 1977), 263.
78 Memorandum, H.L. Taswell to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 19 September 1969, Countries 1/33/3, Vol. 13, ASAMFA.
fascination, the policy he approved in January 1970 was remarkably similar to Macrae’s recommendations, with the implementation of both symbolic and tangible changes in American policy.

Option Two of NSSM 39 recommended a relaxation of sanctions and increased communication with the Afrikaner government. It advocated public condemnation of apartheid but a closer private relationship between the United States and South Africa. This duplicity earned the policy its notorious nickname of Tar Baby, and from the beginning the doublespeak flourished. The first mention of South Africa following Tar Baby’s approval came in Nixon’s February 18, 1970 annual report to Congress on foreign affairs. Nixon wrote, “clearly there is no question of the United States condoning, or acquiescing in, the racial policies of the white-ruled regimes. For moral as well as historical reasons, the United States stands firmly for the principles of racial equality and self-determination.”

But like so many other things during Nixon’s presidency, and other presidencies as well, actions would speak much more loudly than words.

The appointment of John Hurd, Nixon’s loyal supporter and 1968 campaign manager in Texas, as United States Ambassador to South Africa, was perhaps the first symbolic gesture of the Nixon administration’s attempt to strengthen relations between the two nations. Hurd was born in Sacramento, California and attended Harvard University. He moved to Laredo, Texas and became a millionaire as a cattle rancher, independent oil tycoon, and lawyer. Nixon originally appointed Hurd as Ambassador to Venezuela, but Hurd’s connections with the oil industry made the appointment too controversial, and Hurd gladly accepted the Pretoria assignment. Nixon and Hurd met briefly on August 25, 1970, to discuss the challenges South Africa faced. The United States, Nixon told Hurd, “abhor[red] apartheid and [was] committed to continue to implement the Security Council resolutions embargoing arms to South Africa. At the same time, we have and want to preserve our economic, strategic and scientific assets in South Africa. Without compromising our own principles, we also wish to avoid being ‘preachy’ with the South Africans.” Nixon also commented that outbreaks of violence could have severe domestic implications and that the United States was “absolutely opposed to the use of force. We do not believe in the so-called ‘Liberation Groups.'”

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The Afrikaner government welcomed Hurd’s appointment. “While his hands will be tied to some extent by the limitations imposed by American foreign policy towards our country,” South African Ambassador Taswell wrote, “I think Mr. Hurd’s heart is in the right place as far as we are concerned.” Hurd, the South Africans believed, would be more willing to look past apartheid than his liberal predecessor, William Rountree. But the South African government acknowledged Hurd’s naïveté and inexperience with South Africa. Concerned that the United States Embassy staff in Pretoria would “no doubt try to make sure that he meets the ‘wrong’ people,” Taswell recommended that the South African government “go out of our way to see that he also meets the ‘right’ people. Wherever possible he should be encouraged to meet Ministers and well disposed businessmen, etc. We should give him an opportunity to make up his own mind.”

Hurd received sharp criticism, however, as many in the American press perceived him as pro-Afrikaner, deliberately ignoring apartheid. During the summer of 1971, Hurd joined various Afrikaner government figures on a hunting trip to Robben Island. Prisoners served as beaters, running into the brush to flush out the island’s game. Two weeks later, Hurd attended the grand opening of the Malan Opera House in Cape Town, a segregated affair. Three weeks after attending those ceremonies, Hurd hosted an all-white reception at his official residence, where two South African student leaders staged a walkout in protest. A State Department official wrote to Kissinger after an article on Hurd appeared in Newsweek, “those who would like to see us cut off all intercourse with South Africa can, of course, find many things to criticize which are unavoidable so long as we maintain a mission in South Africa which is trying to maintain anything like a decent relationship with South African authorities.”

But despite Hurd’s friendliness with the whites, he was very concerned about the racial conflict in South Africa. “The slow pace and the readiness of the South African government to crack down on dissenters hard whenever it feels its vital interests are threatened will insure continuing United States-South Africa tensions and some bilateral problems.” He also wrote of South African stubbornness: “it will be a long time before white South Africans, both English- and Afrikaans-speaking, come to terms with the rising phenomenon of black consciousness and

82 Memorandum, Taswell to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 11 June 1970, USA Relations with South Africa, Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 16, ASAMFA.
the emergence of articulate and skilled political operators in the non-white communities. Until they do, foreign governments, including the United States, run the risk, in the process of deepening their non-white contacts, of exposing themselves and their non-white friends to political attack.”85 Ultimately Hurd believed that Nixon’s policy “succeeded in walking a fine line between strategic and economic realities and our well-known refusal to acquiesce in racial injustice in any way.”86 This fine line epitomized the inherent flaws with Nixon’s South Africa policy, as it offended nearly everyone, including the South African government.

The review process that was supposed to have been completed in two weeks took nine months to complete. The official announcement of the administration’s new policy took nearly as long. After Nixon approved Kissinger’s recommendation in January 1970, State Department official David Newsom took responsibility for introducing the new policy to the public. This took place gradually and quietly, as the administration feared some opposition and backlash from the press, anti-apartheid activists, and other political dissidents like Michigan Congressman Charles Diggs. Marshall Wright, a National Security Council staff member Department official, wrote to Kissinger, “thus far, everything has gone perfectly . . . . we have had no leaks so far. This kind of luck, however, cannot hold out forever. It is, therefore, time to get ourselves in a good defensive position against the eventual outcry.” The South African, Rhodesian, and British governments, a handful of Nixon-friendly senators and congressmen, and the American chrome companies were slowly informed of the new policy shift throughout the year as the primary parties interested in the administration’s decision.87

The Tar Baby Option became public on September 17, 1970 when Newsom addressed the conservative Chicago Committee of the Council on Foreign Relations. Newsom’s speech focused on strategic and economic interests in South Africa, the United States’ “credibility and effectiveness in the developing world,” and the United States’ “response to Soviet and Chinese advances in Africa.” Newsom outlined the new changes in the administration’s policies and noted, “we do not favor isolation of South Africa . . . . we believe that appropriate channels of communication and dialogue must be kept open. We believe contact with the outside world will

85 Telegram, Hurd to Department of State, 2 August 1973, folder Pol 15-1 SAFR, box 2578, Subject Numerical Files, 1970-1973, Political and Defense, RG 59, GRDS.
help the nonwhite majorities and will help bring the white rulers to an understanding of the need for a change in their policies.”

One of the most important issues that Newsom addressed was the Nixon administration’s new policy that allowed the sale of small, civilian jet craft to the South African government and the South African military. Though sold ostensibly for civilian use, the planes and helicopters could easily be used for security and military purposes, which was against the United Nations Security Council arms embargo. The jet decision bore not only foreign policy implications but domestic ones as well. Lear Jets, headquartered in Wichita, Kansas, stood to benefit from the administration’s decision to allow jet craft sales to South Africa. But Lear and Kansas Senator Bob Dole became concerned as approval for the policy dragged on, and the South Africa government threatened to instead do business with Hawker-Siddeley, a British manufacturer; the lucrative contract was for $10 million. Lear had lain off fifty percent of its employees by the beginning of 1970, and planned to make further cuts if it did not receive the South African contract. The city of Wichita suffered greatly at this time with an unemployment rate of 8.8 percent, the third largest in the nation. Middle-class Americans, the “Silent Majority” who, Nixon believed, were “the forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non demonstrators. They’re good people. They’re decent people. They work and they save and they pay taxes and they care . . . . They give drive to the spirit of America,” were threatened, and Nixon would certainly not sacrifice their well-being for the criticism the administration would receive for doing business with South Africa.

Shortly after his speech in Chicago, Newsom traveled to South Africa in October 1970 to discuss the Nixon administration’s new policy and the political climate in southern Africa with government officials. While the policy announcement appeared to be favorable to the Afrikaner government, officials were not easily convinced. Newsom said the Nixon administration was concerned about the spread of communism in Africa, which had grown strong in the Congo, Somalia, and other frontline states. The Nixon administration hoped, Newsom said, that the South African government would do everything in its power to ebb the flow of communism

across the continent. “Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean,” Newsom noted, “would be contrary to U.S. interests.” Additionally, the United States “was very concerned about the exclusive role which Communist Chinese are achieving with little publicity in the field of military advice and equipment” in Africa. In another meeting, the South African Secretary for Foreign Affairs believed the United States could help combat the communist threat in Africa by providing maritime reconnaissance aircraft to the South African military. The Secretary “found it very difficult to understand why the U.S. remained unwilling to supply” these important weapons against communism. Newsom replied, “the U.S. had strong feelings on the subject—feelings which had to take into account the reactions not only in Africa but also at home. At the highest levels in the U.S. they had reached the conclusion that the implications of supplying any military equipment to South Africa would evoke the strongest negative reaction.”

Numerous governments responded to the administration’s new policy. The Tanzanian government issued a scathing report, accusing the American government of “not car[ing] about African views on the subject.” The report continued, critical of the new policy of jet and helicopter sales. “A nation, such as the United States,” the Tanzanian government argued, “which was born in violence, and has a whole history of violence, internally and externally, should call for non-violence when it concerns other people’s interests.” Tanzanian dissent was not uncommon, as Nixon had feuded with Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere before. Nyerere believed that peaceful change leading to majority rule in southern Africa was highly unlikely, and he often wrote paradoxical letters to Nixon advocating the use of American pressure—economic, diplomatic, and even military—while also accusing the United States of supporting in absentia the violence of oppressive white governments in South Africa, Rhodesia, and elsewhere. On the same day that Ohio National Guard soldiers shot and killed four students at Kent State University, Nixon replied to Nyerere. “We cannot ourselves support the use of force,” Nixon wrote, “since it can only create new and broader dangers for the world community. We are concerned that rather than promoting racial equality and self-determination in southern Africa, the application of force will provoke greater intransigence and repression on the part of

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92 Notes, “Discussions Between Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Mr. Newsom,” 9 November 1970, USA Relations with South Africa, Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 18, ASAMFA.
the minority governments."94 Nixon’s comments were astute, but he could have used his own advice in the quagmire of Vietnam. The Soviet Union was also harsh and highly suspicious, condemning the administration’s new policy and Newsom’s visit to South Africa. These events, the Soviet Union believed, were among “several indications that imperialists are endeavoring to end isolation of racist African governments in order to use them as shock force against progressive regimes.”95 Newsom defended the administration’s moves, stating, “we will continue to refuse to sell or license arms to South Africans. We do not intend to strengthen either its military capacity or its capacity to enforce its own racial policies.”96 The Washington Post, however, felt that the administration essentially appeared “to be opting for a strong status quo policy in black Africa and, where useful, small but increasing accommodations with white minority governments.”97

The jet craft decision was emblematic of the United States’ desire to increase economic ties with South Africa. Senator John Tower urged Nixon to establish “a close liaison . . . between [American] finance people and South African leaders,” and believed the United States should “soften [its] bigoted attitude if for no other reason than South Africa’s powerful leverage through her gold production.”98 The United States and South Africa came to an important agreement on gold in December 1969. South Africa and several European nations applied pressure on the United States to secure the two-tiered gold system that was adopted in March 1968. The system worked well for over a year, but by the end of 1969, gold prices had dropped significantly, which became a major concern to South Africans, whose major export was gold. Although the new deal was not highly beneficial to the United States, Kissinger believed it an important step to pacify the South African government and show good will. The proposal placed a $35 per ounce floor on gold and advocated selling all new gold into the market when the price went over $35. Basically Nixon’s deal aimed to promote confidence in South Africa’s gold

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94 Letter, Nixon to President Julius Nyerere, 4 May 1970, folder: CO 1-1 Africa [1969-70], box 4, Subject Files, WHCF, FNPMP, NARA.  
98 Memorandum, Bryce Harlow to Kissinger, 12 June 1969, folder: CO 135, South Africa, Republic of, box 65, Country Files—Africa, WHCF, NPMP.
market. In a handwritten note to Kissinger, Nixon wrote, “I approve—We had better look after our own interests where national security and international monetary matters are concerned.”

During Nixon’s first administration, United States investments in South Africa rose from $864 million in 1970 to $1.4 billion by the end of 1973. Likewise, American investment in raw materials doubled between 1968 and 1973. The United States’ increased commitment to South Africa had implications in the global marketplace as well. Japan, following America’s lead, increased its exports to South Africa by seventy-four percent during Nixon’s first administration. The most striking figure is the two thousand and four hundred percent increase in Japanese imports of South African raw materials during this same period. But despite the United States’ growing interest in South Africa’s resources, David Newsom became frustrated and told Kissinger that the United States was “being beaten time after time in getting technology contracts” with South Africa “because we fail to recognize the opportunities in developing countries that can pay for what they want.” He continued on to argue that the United States was “the only major trading nation which fails to see the connection between the presence of advisors and commercial opportunities . . . . a mobilization of both official and private resources would open the door to opportunities for an influential relationship, on a basis of mutual benefit, with the developing countries.”

Kissinger advocated “continued profitable trade with South Africa and maintenance of U.S. investments and access to key resources.” South Africa produced six of the United States’ thirty-five most important commodities and held the world’s largest reserves of gold, chrome, vanadium, and platinum and the third-largest reserves of nickel and uranium. American interest in these raw materials kept its association with the white minority government friendly, and helped to procure a mutual economic benefit. On November 17, 1971, Nixon signed into law a bill introduced and passed in the United States Senate by Senator Harry F. Byrd

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101 Memorandum, Patrick J. Buchanan to Nixon, 12 January 1970, folder: CO 135 South Africa, Republic of, box 65, Subject Files, WHCF, NPMP.
104 Christopher Coker, The United States and South Africa, 26.
of Virginia, which essentially ended sanctions against South Africa. The bill authorized the importation of seventy-two strategic and critical materials from southern Africa. Nixon also approved of a plan initiated by Union Carbide to retrieve 150,000 tons of chromium that it had purchased before the 1965 sanctions, which still stood in place. The United States clearly violated United Nations sanctions—in fact, the South African and Rhodesian sanctions were, at this point, the only comprehensive sanctions program approved under the U.N. Charter—but did so in the name of American national security and free trade. In a related move, the United States Department of Commerce abandoned its previous policy of neutrality in the South Africa issue and began to promote investment in Africa’s most prosperous country. Beyond raw materials and investments, the Nixon administration also approved the sale of a nuclear reactor to the South African government in January 1972, but did so outside of the guidelines and insurance stipulations of the Export-Import bank because of the severe political and diplomatic implications of such a deal.

Economic imperatives largely drove American policy toward South Africa, but strategic motivations were of equal, if not greater, importance. After the Suez Canal closed in 1967 following Egypt’s defeat to Israel in the Six Day War, the Cape of Good Hope became the most important gateway between the East and West for the United States and other European nations. South Africa was, according to Rear Admiral W.H. Groverman, “the only fixed point offering modern naval bases, harbors, and airfield facilities, a modern developed industry and a stable government.” The United States faced a “four ocean challenge,” and South African resources were necessary to help the American Navy from stretching itself too thin. South African airspace was also considered crucial, as the United States planned airlifts from their South African naval bases if an international crisis erupted. NASA tracking stations were also used in the late 1960s for lunar and Mars missions. The growing strength of the South African military, which occurred, ironically, in part due to the United Nations arms embargo, allowed the United States to concentrate its efforts on other parts of the world. By the beginning of the 1970s, South Africa had developed its own weapons technology and was a formidable military

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108 Address, Rear Admiral W.H. Groverman, 5 November 1971, USA Relations with South Africa, Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 20, ASAMFA.
The United States depended on South Africa to police Africa as a surrogate defender of capitalism and democracy. Soviet expansion in the Indian Ocean also concerned both the Nixon administration and the South African government, although the latter government believed the United States was not doing enough to stop the threat. The Nixon Administration was, the South African government believed, “initially reluctant to take a step that in effect runs counter to the Nixon doctrine’s strategy of lowering the U.S. military presence in the area.”110 This also could have been one result of Nixon’s new détente policy, which sought to decrease tensions between the United States and Soviet Union.

As David Newsom explained to the South African government during his fall 1970 trip, the spread of communism in Africa was a growing concern of the Nixon administration. While Nixon was developing rapprochement with China and détente with the Soviet Union to better engage in triangular diplomacy, the administration did not want to see communism proliferate further. The Vietnam War exemplified this concern. To Nixon, the Vietnam War was not only about American credibility, but also the desire for a capitalist Pacific Rim to secure American interests, which were fettered by communist infiltration.111 This worldview carried over into Nixon’s South Africa policy. Communism was particularly attractive to liberation movements, as it advocated the acceptance of all races and support from the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China.112 To many black Africans, the promise of worker’s rights and a classless society was the polar opposite of the oppressive, racist apartheid system, and thus communism appealed to them. Nelson Mandela, who in 1994 became South Africa’s first black president, was never a communist but became intrigued by its ideals. Initially Mandela “saw the struggle in South Africa as purely racial. But the [communist] party saw South Africa’s problems through the lens of the class struggle.”113 This new vision was powerful, and had a tremendous impact on the liberation efforts.

Not all black South Africans were communists, however, and a divide often existed between nationalists, such as the African National Congress, and communists on how to attain

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110 Address, Rear Admiral W.H. Groverman, 5 November 1971, USA Relations with South Africa, Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 20, ASAMFA.
liberation. But in the struggle against apartheid, the different factions were forced to set aside their ideological differences for the greater good. “While I was not a communist or a member of the party,” Mandela wrote, “I did not want to be seen as distancing myself from my communist allies. Although I could have been sent back to jail for voicing such views, I did not hesitate to reaffirm the tremendous support the communists had given us.”

Unfortunately the United States and other Western nations confused Mandela’s support of communists groups with the support of communist ideology, and they were unable to distinguish between insurgent groups that were communist-influenced and those that were not. To the Nixon administration, all liberation forces were influenced by communism, or at least had the potential to be. “Our real enemy in South Africa,” John Hurd remarked to South African Ambassador Taswell, “is communism. What worries me is that there are countries and leaders on the continent who are ready and willing to try to ride the tiger.”

The Soviet Union took great pride in its efforts to help liberate African nations. It boasted economic and trade agreements with over thirty countries. It provided arms and training to guerilla groups. And it fully supported liberation efforts against oppressive, racist regimes. The Soviet Union’s economic relationships, it believed, were different than those between Western nations and African countries because the Soviet Union’s system was based on equality and the nationalization of foreign monopolies such as steel and iron. Conversely, African relationships with the United States, the Soviet Union believed, were neo-colonialist and exploited labor and raw material resources for its own benefit. In South Africa, the Soviet Union believed its efforts helped to isolate South Africa from the international community. The Soviet Union initiated numerous resolutions in the United Nations condemning apartheid and racism, including the “Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racism,” which urged strict sanctions against South Africa. In southern Africa, the Soviet Union saw an opportunity to gain economic and strategic superiority over its Western enemies.

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114 Ibid., 218-219.
115 Memorandum, Taswell to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 25 March 1971, USA Relations with South Africa, Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 18, ASAMFA.
116 E.A. Tarabrin, ed., USSR and countries of AFRICA (Friendship, Cooperation, Support for the Anti-Imperialist Struggle) (Moscow: Progress, 1977), 16.
117 Ibid., 134.
With the appeal of communism and the Soviet Union’s strong presence in southern Africa, the Nixon administration felt that both capitalism and their strategic and economic interests were at stake. The Nixon administration also feared Chinese influence. In a secret meeting in the United Nations building in New York City, South African Minister of Foreign Affairs Connie Muller met with newly-appointed United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Nixon had been unhappy with William Rogers and after his landslide election victory in November 1972, he wanted Rogers out as Secretary of State. Rogers refused to resign, urging Alexander Haig to “tell the president to go fuck himself” after Nixon sent Haig to deliver the news. Eventually Rogers acquiesced to Nixon’s demands, and Kissinger became America’s fifty-fourth Secretary of State on September 21. At the meeting with Kissinger, Foreign Minister Muller voiced his concerns. “A matter that causes us problems,” Muller told Kissinger, “is that elements are urging violence in Africa under the pretexts of human rights, when they are really trying to overcome the established order. The Chinese are furnishing supplies to those people.”

Kissinger replied, “I think the Chinese attitude is primarily influenced by their competition with the Soviet Union. Part of their strategy is to capture the non-aligned nations and to prevent the world communist movement from ostracizing them. When I look at Africa, I would expect that the Chinese will be more active.”

“And will they get away with it?” Muller asked.

“I think the Chinese may get away with it,” Kissinger said. “Now, if they reach the point of setting up a Peking-dominated African state, then we would oppose. But they can intrude with violent movements. I don’t say they will achieve dominance, but a foothold.”

But the Afrikaner government considered communists to be terrorists and was willing to use the strongest means necessary to protect its way of life. Prime Minister B.J. Vorster employed classic Cold War rhetoric to illustrate the threat to the white South African citizenry. “Our biggest problem,” Vorster said in a famous speech at Heilbron in 1968, “is this: to keep southern Africa free of communism. I will do what is necessary in order that Afrikanerdom and the White man in South Africa may survive . . . and only the National Party can save South

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Africa from that which threatens it and from that awaiting it.”¹²¹ Thus a close, strong relationship with the capitalist, democratic Afrikaner government made sense to Nixon; he perceived it as a surrogate America to protect democratic ideals and free trade in southern Africa. The Nixon administration praised Vorster’s policies and defenses against communism. “Vorster deserves credit,” Kissinger wrote to Nixon, “for tackling the problem in the face of conflicting black and white African pressures.”¹²² Nixon did not want southern Africa to end up like Vietnam, which ultimately meant little interaction with black resistance movements that were or had the possibility to be influenced by communism. But to Nixon, the United States’ vital interests in South Africa—economic and strategic—were more important than black liberation, and a strong relationship with the Afrikaner government was more than justifiable in the context of the enduring Cold War struggle.

¹²¹ Vorster, Select Speeches, 104.
¹²² Memorandum, Kissinger to Nixon, 19 June 1972, folder: CO 135 South Africa, Republic of 1/1/71, box 66, Subject Files, WHCF, NPMP.
CHAPTER FOUR
Transient Sympathy

Those who would like to see us cut off all intercourse with South Africa can find many things to criticize which are unavoidable so long as we maintain a mission in South Africa which is trying to maintain anything like a decent relationship with South African authorities.

—Marshall Wright

I ask prominent Americans whether they have solved their colour question in America. And then they tell me, “No.” Then I ask the British whether they have solved their problem. They too say “No.” Have I not the right then to ask: If the solution you offer is by your own admission no solution, what moral right do you have to impose it on me and my people?

—B.J. Vorster

A massive explosion rocked New York City at 10:30 a.m. on April 12, 1971. A crude pipe bomb ripped apart the South African consulate-general, destroying the outer wall, ceiling, and furnishings of the fourteenth floor office. The consulate had received numerous threats before the bombing, and forty-five minutes after the explosion a group claiming to be the “Black Revolution Assault Team” called the Associated Press switchboard and took credit for the bombing. “This is the Black Revolution Assault Team,” the caller said. “We have just bombed the South Africa Consul. More power to the people.” Fortunately, the consulate was closed that morning due to the Easter holiday, and no one was injured. Attacks like this—protests against apartheid and American foreign policy—were not uncommon during Nixon’s presidency, nor were harsh critics of his South Africa policy. Dissidents both at home and abroad chastised the administration’s moves to strengthen relations with the Afrikaner government while doing little for the oppressed blacks. While these dissidents did make some noise, ultimately their

123 Memorandum, Wright to Kissinger, 12 July 1971, folder: CO 135, box 65, Subject Files, WHCF, NPMP.
124 Vorster, Select Speeches, 77.
opposition was fleeting and had little impact on Nixon’s policies. But their activism set a
standard for future protests, which played a larger role in helping to bring apartheid to an end.

Charles C. Diggs, Jr. was the loudest critic of Nixon’s South Africa policy. Diggs, a
thirteen-term congressman from Detroit, founded the Congressional Black Caucus and chaired
the House subcommittee on Africa. Diggs continually harassed the White House over its South
Africa policy, sending memoranda and telegrams to Nixon staffers and holding press
conferences accusing the administration of ignoring black South Africans. He traveled to South
Africa in 1969 and 1971, both times on restricted visas. Diggs became incensed with the
restrictions placed upon him, and the Johannesburg Star’s headline on August 7, 1969 read,
“American official and Congressional circles seething with indignation at the South African
Government’s insistence on applying restrictive conditions on visas.” Ambassador Taswell
remarked of the incident, “it did not do us much good . . . . Diggs can be expected to make as
much of this incident as he possible can in the future. So we have by no means heard the last of
it.”126

While in South Africa, Diggs visited the township of Soweto, the NASA tracking facility
outside Johannesburg, and American corporations with plants in South Africa. During his visit
to the General Motors facility, Diggs became enraged with managing director William G.
Slocumb, who said that his plant adhered to South African law on separate facilities for whites
and blacks.

“Doesn’t it turn your stomach that I,” Diggs asked, “as an American, in an American
plant, would have to use a segregated facility?”

Slocumb replied, “whether my stomach is turned or not is not important. I feel our
company, in being here, is doing a useful service to all persons here. The job opportunities we
provide would not be provided without us.”

Diggs became quite angry and said, “General Motors can do a hell of a lot more.”127

Diggs attempted to draw a line between the White House and State Department. He
announced that he was in favor of black diplomatic officer assignments to the American embassy
in Pretoria and claimed the State Department favored such action, but that the White House was
“drag[ging] its feet” on the issue. NSC staff member Marshall Wright, wrote to Kissinger that

126 Memorandum, Taswell to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 15 August 1969, USA Relations with South Africa,
Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 13, ASAMFA.
127 Quoted in Massie, Loosing the Bonds, 299-300.
Diggs’ accusations were inaccurate. “It is a part of the once rampant and now moribund conviction in the liberal community,” Wright argued, “that State is with them on South African issues. But I am, and have always been, prepared to see a black Foreign Service Officer assigned to South Africa any time State so recommends.”

Diggs continually irritated the Nixon administration, especially with his 1971 sub-committee hearings. He wrote to Secretary of State William Rogers in October 1971: “it is totally unacceptable that the U.S. Government takes refuge in allegations of general ‘continuing efforts’ with the South African Government. I would appreciate more specificity on our communications with the South African Government on its violations of the rule of law and of human rights.”

The Diggs hearings hoped to unite the antiapartheid effort by focusing on American corporations in South Africa and the neglect of the Nixon administration. “His intention,” Kissinger wrote to Clark MacGregor, “appears to be to discredit the administration by showing that our activities in southern Africa do not live up to our pronouncements on apartheid.”

Kissinger was livid after Diggs resigned from United States delegation to the United Nations in December 1971 in protest of the Nixon administration’s hypocritical South Africa policy. Diggs sent a scathing cable to William Rogers saying that he would rather walk out of the United Nations than be told how to vote on South African issues. Diggs continued to say that “under the Constitutional principle of separation of powers I will not be bound in the future by any instructions upon which I have not been fully consulted and given an opportunity for reconciling my personal point of view.” NSC staff member Marshall Wright wrote to Kissinger, “he is rather given to sending volts from heaven, like the present one, via telegraph wires. I would not, however, rule out the possibility that he would choose to shore up his position as the leader of the Black Caucus by dramatically breaking with the administration on a UN issue having to do with southern African problems.”

Wright’s prediction came true. On December 4, 1971, Diggs released his “Action Manifesto,” which contained policy recommendations based on his recent trip to southern Africa.

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128 Memorandum, Wright to Kissinger, 20 September 1971, folder: Marshall Wright, box 838, Name Files, NSCF, NPMP.
131 Memorandum, Kissinger to Clark MacGregor, 4 June 1971, folder: CO 135, box 65, Subject Files, WHCF, NPMP.
132 Memorandum, Wright to Kissinger, 30 November 1971, folder: CO 135, box 65, Subject Files, WHCF, NPMP.
and the results of the House subcommittee on Africa. “Our government,” Diggs wrote, “decries violence as a means of liberation, without condemning the violence which the South African government uses to enforce the subjugation of the majority of the people.”133 Diggs advocated the development of international sanctions against South Africa, increased communication between American officials and black leaders, expansion of educational and cultural programs to blacks, a stronger arms embargo, decreased investment and American corporation presence in South Africa, a sugar quota, the end of nuclear partnership, a stricter policy on visas to South Africans, and an open condemnation of Prime Minister Vorster’s Bantustan, or tribal homeland, program. Bantustans were originally the idea of Hendrik Verwoerd, who proposed separating the black majority into tribal nations in order to more easily divide-and-rule the growing black population. Along with the division was a Bantu education program, which called for the government to take control of all black education.134 The Bantu program ultimately aimed to keep blacks away from urban areas, permanently segregating the population.135 The Nixon administration was guardedly optimistic about Vorster’s continuation of Bantustan development. During his fall of 1970 trip to South Africa, David Newsom discussed the separate homeland program with government officials. Newsom asked if the Afrikaner government was “really prepared to allow blacks national groups to advance to complete independence.” Ambassador Taswell replied that they were and referred Newsom to Prime Minister Vorster’s recent speech on the topic.136 “The policy of the National Party,” Vorster had said then, “is the policy of separate development. It is essential that peace and tranquility and calm must reign in a country like South Africa, that there must be proper borders between nation and nation. Eliminate those borders and you will end in a mess that will wound you and render your society in South Africa impossible.”137 Vorster’s call for “separate” development was reminiscent of the “separate but equal” Jim Crow laws in the United States throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Diggs’ “Action Manifesto” had little impact on Nixon’s policy and received criticism from abroad. Catherine Taylor, a United Party member of parliament in South Africa, said that most Americans that she met “don’t even know who [Diggs] is,” and that his visit to South

134 Allister Sparks, The Mind of South Africa, 195.
135 Thompson, A History of South Africa, 193.
136 Memorandum, Taswell to Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 30 October 1970, USA Relations with South Africa, Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 17, ASAMFA.
137 Vorster, Select Speeches, 177.
Africa was “badly over-publicized.” She also believed that Diggs “was almost bound to behave like a prima donna from the start.”

Diggs strongly believed that the presence of American businesses in South Africa helped to legitimize apartheid. His experience in the General Motors facility strengthened this belief, and he argued that American companies needed to do their part to help bring change in South Africa. Polaroid, which came under attack by many of its black workers for its presence in South Africa, was the first major American corporation to take a stand against the Afrikaner government. A four-man delegation of two blacks and two whites visited the South African Polaroid operation in the fall of 1970 to determine whether or not Polaroid should pull its operations out of the country. The delegation concluded that Polaroid should stay in South Africa, but also that the company should increase wages by twenty-five percent, expand worker training for upward mobility, and commit financial support for black education in South Africa. Polaroid approved these recommendations and took out advertisements in all major American newspapers announcing “An Experiment in South Africa.” The advertisement stated, “how can we presume to concern ourselves with the problems of another country? Whatever the practices are elsewhere, South Africa alone articulates a policy contrary to everything we feel our company stand for. We cannot participate passively in such a political system. Nor can we ignore it. That is why we have undertaken this experimental program.” The Nixon administration quietly supported Polaroid’s decision, which it saw as a “fresh, intriguing experiment which may hold promise of making a constructive contribution in South Africa and to the image of U.S. business relations with South Africa. Our position with Polaroid has been one of facilitation and encouragement, while avoiding too close association with its efforts.”

To the Nixon administration, Polaroid’s actions gave “a concrete aspect to [their] claim that contact—not violence or isolation—[was] the engine of change in South Africa.”

Polaroid’s actions were important for several reasons. They proved that major American corporations could attempt to help to end apartheid by going public with new policies and not sitting quietly while apartheid subjugated millions of black South Africans. Polaroid’s

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138 Memorandum, Hurd to Secretary of State, 14 September 1971, Folder: pol 15-2 S AFR, box 2578, RG 59, GRDS.
139 Quoted in Hero and Barratt, *The American People and South Africa*, 89.
experiment also showed that engagement proved to be a more enlightened approach than
disengagement; working from within, Polaroid believed, would put more pressure on the South
African government than totally abandoning blacks. This would have eliminated thousands of
jobs and done little to help liberate black workers. But despite its progressive attempts to help
South Africa blacks, Polaroid eventually left the country. Profits from the South African
operation were lagging, and the protests of African-Americans increased, which cost the
company great amounts of time and money.\textsuperscript{142} At the time the experiment failed, but in the long
run Polaroid’s efforts were important to the growing protest movement against apartheid.

Student activism was not particularly important to the antiapartheid movement during
Nixon’s first administration. By the end of the decade, however, it became a major force in the
growing battle against South Africa’s system of legal separation. During the early 1970s,
campus administrators realized the potential power of student unrest from the massive backlash
against the Vietnam War. Confrontation and violence replaced the free speech movement began
at the University of California at Berkeley in the 1960s as students’ most efficient method of
gaining attention. Universities quickly learned that they ignored student concerns at their own
risk.\textsuperscript{143}

During the early 1970s, students began to understand that American educational
institutions were not autonomous entities distanced from the economic system of the United
States. Like American corporations, colleges and universities had investment portfolios. Many
of these investments were linked to American corporations in South Africa or to South African
businesses. The invention of the ethical investor model began to take shape during the Nixon
presidency. Students concentrated on the investment portfolios of their institutions in an effort to
bring about a larger awareness of the South African tragedy and the problems of apartheid. They
argued that any association with businesses that helped to strengthen or legitimize the apartheid
system was morally wrong, and that the best way to support international civil and human rights
ideals was to sell their stocks in those companies. Divestment became a heated issue between
student groups and university administrators. College presidents and Boards of Trustees, for the
most part, acknowledged that apartheid was an unethical practice and should come to an eventual
end. They also argued, however, that simple divestment would not bring about any real change

\textsuperscript{142} Hero and Barratt, \textit{The American People and South Africa}, 91.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 126.
to the South African situation, as the amount of investments in South Africa were relatively small. But these thoughts did not deter the student movements.144

The 1976 Soweto riots and the 1977 murder of Black Consciousness father and founder of the South African Students’ Organization Steve Biko brought the world’s attention to South Africa and sparked student protest across America. In the spring of 1978, students organized demonstrations at colleges and universities across the United States to protest South African investments. A sit-in at Princeton, a march at Vanderbilt opposing the United States’ tennis match with South Africa in the Davis Cup, and massive petition drives from the West Coast at UCLA to the Midwest at Ohio University to the East Coast at Cornell sparked awareness and interest in the divestment idea. Some of the movements ended with hard-fought successes, as Boards of Trustees decided to curtail or cut completely their investments in South Africa. Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, gained national recognition on May 3, 1978, when the *Wall Street Journal* reported that because of student initiatives, the Board of Trustees had voted to sell its stocks in South African businesses and became one of the first institutions of higher education to actively protest apartheid. While these events took place well after Nixon left office, the seeds for the large-scale apartheid protest movements of the late-1970s and 1980s began during his presidency and flourished as more Americans became aware of apartheid.

The antiapartheid movement proved to be ephemeral during Nixon’s first administration. While Charles Diggs did win a few small victories, including the 1972 addition of a black Foreign Service Officer to the American Embassy in Pretoria, his defeats were much more significant. Senate Bill 1404, which ended sanctions against South Africa and Rhodesia, passed through Congress with ease. Vital minerals such as chrome were crucial to American national security, Senator Harry Byrd, the bill’s sponsor argued, and necessary to defeat communism. Four months after the passage of the Byrd measure, twenty-five thousand tons of southern African chomeferrite arrived in the United States. Millions of American dollars were invested in the white supremacist governments of B.J. Vorster in South Africa and Ian Smith in Rhodesia. Shortly after the Byrd amendment passed, Vorster, fueled by America’s seeming disinterest in apartheid, ordered a massive police initiative against church activists. Vorster believed that the

144 Ibid., 127.
United States was unlikely to condemn such a move, and the arrests and detaining went largely unnoticed in the Western press.¹⁴⁵

During the 1972 presidential campaign, the majority of African-Americans, including Congressman Diggs, supported Democrat George McGovern. The Congressional Black Caucus, Diggs’ creation, convinced McGovern to include opposition to apartheid and Nixon’s South Africa policy as a major platform in his campaign. While South Africa certainly was not a catalyst in the campaign, McGovern and his supporters did spend too much time with the issue. This turned out to be a mistake for McGovern, as Americans in general were largely unconcerned with South Africa during the early 1970s.¹⁴⁶ In November 1972, Nixon defeated McGovern in a landslide victory, capturing nearly sixty-one percent of the popular vote. As McGovern’s presidential aspirations faded away, the opposition to Nixon’s South Africa policy quietly died too.

¹⁴⁵ Massie, Loosing the Bonds, 302.
¹⁴⁶ Metz, “Congress, the Antiapartheid Movement, and Nixon,” 179.
CHAPTER FIVE

We’ll Take Care of the Rest of the World

Henry, let’s leave the niggers to Bill [Rogers] and we’ll take care of the rest of the world.

—Richard Nixon

A man who takes away another man’s freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.

—Nelson Mandela

South African Ambassador H.L.T. Taswell was relieved to be in Florida. While speaking in Santa Barbara, California in August 1970, Taswell encountered a chorus of heckling and a large group of raucous picketers who were protesting the Afrikaner government and its apartheid policies. The Rotary Club in Jacksonville, Florida received him quite differently. “I received a very friendly welcome,” Taswell commented. “From the reaction [of the audience] it was quite obvious that we have much goodwill towards our country in that part of the world which is having its own share of troubles. We must certainly not underestimate the goodwill towards us in states in the South. The pressures exerted by Florida for example are by no means overlooked by the Nixon administration.” The American South saw South Africa as a surrogate brother who, like them, was battling to maintain its way of life. While Richard Nixon did not share these exact same views, he did see South Africa as an important piece to his idea of global stability. The importance of South Africa was not in its racial policies, but in its ability to help the United States achieve its goals in the détente years of the Cold War.

The Nixon administration developed a closer relationship with the Afrikaner government from 1969 to 1973 than any presidential administration before it. In theory, the Nixon administration believed that the white government would be in power indefinitely, and that

148 Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom, 544.
149 Memorandum, Taswell to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 17 August 1970, USA Relations with South Africa, Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 18, ASAMFA.
change would only be able to take place through it. In practice, the Nixon administration did nothing to help black South Africans and only strengthened relations with the Afrikaner government. Nixon was certainly not as uninterested in South Africa as many scholars have argued; he was simply uninterested in black South Africans. “What happens in those parts of the world,” Nixon wrote, “is not, in the final analysis, going to have any significant effect on the success of our foreign policy in the foreseeable future.”

The inherent nature of Tar Baby was racist, as it assumed that black South Africans were unable to rule themselves. Nixon, a Quaker from Whittier, California, was not a racist in the extreme sense of segregationist southerners and the Jim Crow “separate but equal” doctrine. Still, Nixon and many of his policies, including South Africa, were racially-motivated. Nixon questioned the ability of African-Americans to compete with whites and hated Democrat Jews who he labeled as “cocksuckers.” During his presidency, the Nixon administration promoted no new civil rights initiatives and opposed school integration via cross-district busing. Nixon often referred to Africans and African-Americans as “niggers” and “jigaboos” in phone conversations. In southern Africa, Nixon assumed that blacks were inferior to whites and could not rule themselves. But this assumption, however bigoted, was not entirely unfounded. At the beginning of the 1970s, the resistance movements in South Africa were shattered. No organization existed between the underground and banned groups. The strongest and most important black South African leaders were in prison or in exile. Their voices were muted and in some cases, eternally silenced. Regardless, Nixon’s South Africa policy was driven by racism, which allowed him to pursue the supposed “realistic” goals of realpolitik, focusing on economic, geo-political, and other Cold War interests.

And so we must ask, what should the Nixon administration have done? Stronger sanctions, better American leadership within the United Nations on apartheid, and increased pressure on the Afrikaner government to release political prisoners would have sped the liberation efforts along. But the Vietnam War, China, and the Soviet Union dominated Nixon’s foreign policy apparatus. Nixon prioritized, focusing on those issues he considered to be most important to his vision of world order. But Nixon did not necessarily follow the “Grand Design”

strategy that many historians have mythologized, as much of his foreign policy was improvised. Outside of the great power political sphere, Nixon employed a classic Cold War strategy with the rest of the world: above all else, protect American interests. Nixon left the “niggers” to the State Department while he and Kissinger engaged in the great global game of realpolitik. South Africa did matter, but only in a peripheral manner. A strong Afrikaner government was, in the most simplistic terms, good for the United States. And so Nixon felt no need to lose a powerful ally by interfering in South Africa’s domestic affairs. But Nixon’s prediction that the whites were in power “to stay” proved quite wrong. The Portuguese regimes in Angola and Mozambique fell in 1975 to the black liberation groups, and Ian Smith’s white government in Rhodesia would soon follow in 1980 with the election of Robert Mugabe as Zimbabwe’s first black president. Nixon’s southern and South Africa policy shows the flaws of realpolitik. It revealed that realpolitik was not always realistic, as black liberation did come despite the Nixon administration’s steadfast conclusion that it could not unless directed by whites. Nixon’s reliance on realpolitik also undermined the image of the United States to the global community as America, the defender of “democracy,” sat silently and supported oppressive white governments as black Africans won their independence across the continent. It was also unrealistic for Nixon to ignore the rising tide of African nationalism. Nixon’s South Africa policy illustrates a lapse in his typical long-term thinking about the world.

The South Africa story epitomizes the problems Nixon faced—or created—throughout his presidency. No matter what policy Nixon chose to implement—in the case of South Africa he tried, at least in theory, to balance both sides of the thorny apartheid issue—nearly everyone, including the South African government which he was accused of embracing too closely, criticized his decision. Like Brer Rabbit, Nixon became incredibly stuck in a terrible, shortsighted policy that all sides disparaged. But however close the Nixon administration did become with South Africa, the relationship was not as close as most critics believed. Despite the perception that the relationship between South Africa and the United States was more than comfortable, the South African government believed that the United States continued to meddle. “United States policy is still one of blatant interference in our domestic affairs,” a secret South African report revealed. “Their attitude is remarkably patronizing and their understanding of our

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policy and the realities of South Africa is still abysmal.” When Nixon took office, South African officials were confident that the new administration would be more sympathetic than its predecessors. However, the report believed, “there was little evidence of lowered voices on South Africa. In forum after forum, State Department spokesmen made use of every opportunity to instigate the Republic.”

South Africa had warned the Nixon administration numerous times. Foreign Minister Muller “made long statements warning the United States government against crossing the ‘flimsy’ line between suasion and interference in South Africa’s internal affairs” and insisted that South Africa was “going out of its way to improve communications with the United States.” The United States, Muller noted, “still did not understand that [South Africa was] a multinational and not a multiracial country. They do not accept the right to a separate nationality of the whites in South Africa only. Nor do they accept that the changes which are taking place in South Africa are the direct result—the logical outcome—of our declared policies.” The Vorster administration sincerely believed that the Bantustan program would solve the racial problem in South Africa, and was upset that the United States did “not understand, or accept, that separate development has exactly the same goals that each nation has a sovereign right to its own independence and to recognition of its own dignity—that each individual has a human right to that same recognition.” Nixon called for these same rights in his 1970 speech to Congress. But “until we can persuade the United States of the sincerity of our policy,” the secret report concluded, “there is little likelihood of a really basic change in their attitude toward us.” Thus the relationship was not as close as it seemed, and Nixon faced adversity from yet another corner. The combination of Nixon’s South Africa policy and the Afrikaner government’s strength and intransigence made liberation virtually impossible during the early 1970s. Change would come, but not on Nixon’s watch.

Black South Africans finally won their independence in 1994, twenty years after Richard Nixon resigned from the presidency. The transformation from apartheid to the multi-racial democracy of modern South Africa in the early 1990s was relatively peaceful. The United States

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155 Telegram, American Embassy Cape Town to Secretary of State, 5 May 1972, folder: South Africa Jan 1972- Vol. II, box 747, NSCF, NPMP.
156 Report, “The Development of South African-United States Relations Under the Nixon Administration,” undated, USA Relations with South Africa, Countries, 1/33/3, Vol. 20, ASAMFA.
played an important role in its transformation.\textsuperscript{157} At the University of Pennsylvania’s commencement in May 2003, the Nobel laureate and Archbishop Desmond Tutu noted that South Africans owed America a great debt. “This country,” Tutu said, “helped us to become free. You helped us to become democratic. You helped us to become a country that is seeking to be nonracial and nonsexist. You didn't bomb us into liberation. We became free nonviolently. And the country demonstrated that there are other ways of dealing with difference, with disagreement, with conflict: the way of forgiveness, the way of compromise, the way of reconciliation.”\textsuperscript{158} But thousands of South Africans did die throughout the entire apartheid struggle: blacks and whites, young and old, wealthy and poor, famous and unknown, bigoted and tolerant. Apartheid affected not only blacks but also an entire country, and ultimately the entire world.

In a final irony of Tar Baby’s legacy, change in South Africa did come through the whites, albeit two decades and thousands of lives beyond Nixon’s presidency. Without president F.W. de Klerk’s leadership over the tenuous final years of apartheid, even more blood could have been spilled over South African soil. Nelson Mandela “was impressed by [de Klerk’s] emphasis on reconciliation. His words imbued millions of South Africans and people around the world with the hope that a new South Africa was about to be born.”\textsuperscript{159} Now blacks are free. And now, a decade after apartheid ended, the Afrikaners who dominated South Africa for nearly two centuries feel isolated. Their language, Afrikaans, is being slowly removed from universities in favor of English. White farmers have been victims of violence and in neighboring Zimbabwe, farmers continue to be murdered and forced off their land. Many Afrikaners feel the South African government has done little to stop such violence while turning a blind eye to Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe’s actions. Racism remains a serious problem to white South Africa, and many Afrikaners believe that they have been neglected in the nation-building process they helped to begin.\textsuperscript{160} South Africa remains a divided nation, in part because of the prolonged liberation process.

\textsuperscript{159} Mandela, \textit{Long Walk to Freedom}, 482.
Richard Nixon died on April 22, 1994, three days before the first multi-racial democratic elections in South African history. He did not live to see Nelson Mandela become the first black president of South Africa, nor to witness the transition to a free, democratic nation. The Nixon administration did nothing to help blacks gain this independence. The ultimate legacy of Nixon’s South Africa policy lies in its neglect of black South Africans and the hindrance of the liberation process. Perhaps total freedom and a multi-racial democracy was not entirely possible in the early 1970s. The process, though, could have started then with American influence. In the end, the Nixon administration underestimated the potential of black South Africans and strengthened apartheid through a closer relationship with the white minority government and the worst sins of all, silence and indifference.
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