

**‘YOUR PAIN IS MY PAIN’  
THE AMERICAN ANTI-APARTHEID MOVEMENT AND  
THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS: 1980-1985**

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*Please note that this is a draft paper, which is incomplete. It is intended to conclude with the passing of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act(CAAA) of 1986. The period between 1985-1986, was one of intense activity on the part of the solidarity groups and the ANC, with the momentum increasing for the implementation of drastic action against South Africa. A scrutiny of those activities and the vital role played by the groups and the ANC has not been examined here.*

*Also, in assessing the impact of the solidarity groups, for the purposes of this paper I have focused mainly on the Washington groups as they were strategically located to impose the necessary pressure on the state department and the White House.*

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On the 18 July 2003, Nelson Mandela celebrated his 85<sup>th</sup> birthday amidst great pomp and ceremony at the Sandton Convention Centre in Johannesburg. Present at the birthday celebration were many wealthy Americans representing the most powerful segments of American society. These included Mr. Rockefeller and former President Bill Clinton, as guest of honour. As I watched the many foreign dignitaries rush to eagerly clasp the hand of Nelson Mandela and listened to Mr. Clinton's poignant reflections on the personal nature of his relationship with our former President, I pondered rather emotionally and naively the historic resonances of the moment which I later discovered was not lost on reporter Humphrey Tyler, but for different reasons. Tyler provided a rather candid assessment of this event by reminding us that while this occasion paid tribute to Mandela, it was not many years ago that the US State Department described Mr. Mandela as being the leader of an organization that was not just a 'terrorist organisation', but also 'one of the most notorious terrorist groups' in the world."<sup>1</sup>(DNews 11 Aug) This description was used at a time when the South African apartheid state, then at its most objectionable, was considered a friend and "favoured ally" of the United States of America. So the symbolism of this birthday celebration can be discerned from its ability to showcase the long and difficult road taken by the African National Congress together with its allies in the United States from the 1950's to bring us to this stage of the relationship between the ANC and USA as epitomized by the close friendship between an American President and a African liberation leader in 2003.

It is within this context that this paper will seek to explore the relationship between the ANC and the USA. It will do so by providing an overview of US policy towards South Africa and the ANC with a particular focus on, and analysis of, the role of the Solidarity movement in the development of this relationship. No study of the ANC/USA relationship can be undertaken without a scrutiny of role of these groups. This would include an assessment of the effectiveness of the latter in raising the profile of the ANC in the USA and of advancing the struggle on the international arena. By the 1980's, it was clear that the apartheid state had the most powerful global player on its side. Yet by 1986, the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act was passed in the USA, effectively

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<sup>1</sup> *The Daily News*, 11 August 2003.

repudiating Reagan's policy of constructive engagement in South Africa and by 1990, the death knell of apartheid was sounded with the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Nelson Mandela. This was not accomplished purely through the efforts of the African National Congress as it has so often claimed. These developments must be viewed against the background of events in South Africa and the escalating pressure within the United States for stronger action against South Africa, stemming from the work of the Solidarity groups. In the US, the latter positioned its work to change perceptions of the state department officials and civil society against the tide of support for the apartheid state.

The examination of the role of the American solidarity movement is critical in understanding how the work of this group was linked to the struggles for justice throughout the world. For this is a history that is not well known nor well documented. Nor are its global dimensions understood except by those that were involved. According to Bill Minter, one of the more vocal members of this network, the history of the movement is one "that includes the world wide anti-apartheid movement, arguably one of the most significant transnational social movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century...a history that also reaches beyond South Africa, linking those involved in successive struggles against injustice on the African continent with others around the world who saw those struggles as integrally tied to their own".<sup>2</sup> In effect, then the role of the anti-apartheid movement was critical for the ANC in its attempts to advance the struggle on the international stage and in to achieve the recognition of being the legitimate liberation organization, harboring the hopes of the oppressed majority.

In May 1981, Randall Robinson of Transafrica, received a phone call from a US State Department official, who wished to remain anonymous, offering to drop off classified state department documents that described the new framework for a new alliance between the USA and South Africa, which will be elaborated upon later in this chapter. Suffice at this point to add that the following points in these documents leaked to Robinson encapsulated the trend of US policy towards South Africa on the one hand and the African National Congress on the other.

*We want to open a new chapter in relations with South Africa---We will not allow others to dictate what our relations with South Africa will be --we may continue to differ on apartheid---but we can cooperate ---our cooperative relationship would also recognize the key economic role played by South Africa in the region....<sup>3</sup>*

Barely three years later, on 21 November 1984, Randall Robinson, Mary Frances Berry, a member of the US Civil Rights Commission, Congressman Walter Fauntroy, and Elinor Holmes Norton, a Georgetown University Law Professor, entered the South African embassy in Washington on the pretext of keeping a meeting with the Ambassador. Their true intention was to stage a sit in and court arrest.<sup>4</sup> They were successful in this endeavour. Following their release from prison on thanksgiving morning, they

<sup>2</sup> Bill Minter at meeting of *American Friends Services Committee*, 7 December 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Verbatim Text of Document furnished by *Transafrica*, 4 December 2002; See also *Transafrica News Report Special Edition*, August 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with activist and staff member of *Transafrica*, 4 December 2002, Washington DC.

announced the founding of the Free South Africa Movement(FSAM) whose principle objective was to secure the passage of the comprehensive economic sanctions against South Africa.

What happened between these two events is critical in understanding how the different relationships evolved and the issues that galvanized the anti-apartheid movement into action. Reagan was inaugurated as President of the United States in January 1981. Barely four months later, on 27 May 1981, Randall Robinson received that visit from the anonymous state department official(alluded to earlier on) who urged the Transafrica leader to “use them[the documents] as you see fit” as “this is a terrible and indefensible thing the administration is doing her...”<sup>5</sup> “Mindful that the disclosure of sensitive policy materials is not a matter to be taken lightly”, Robinson felt it necessary to “encourage broad public debate” by making the documents available to the *Washington Post* the very next morning. Within two days the papers were authenticated by the State Department and the *Post* ran the story a day later.<sup>6</sup> Within a week, the story made its way into international newspapers. At this point it might be pertinent to raise the question of why the release of such documentation was considered vital to advancing the cause of the struggle in South Africa. I would argue that while the documents themselves contained texts of classified State Department memoranda which described discussions and preparations for discussions between American and South African foreign policy officials, their importance could be discerned from the evidence they provided on why South Africa continued with its belligerent behavior. They also provided evidence of how the country’s oppressed majority had its interests subordinated to the goal of restoring South Africa to “international respectability and a role in the western alliance”.<sup>7</sup>

The documents provided vital evidence of discussions held at a meeting which took place in Pretoria on 15-16 April 1981, at which the South African foreign Minister, Pik Botha, South African Defence Minister Magnus Malan, US Assistant Secretary-designate Chester Crocker and State Department official Alan Keyes were present. From the Memorandum of the conversation that took place, it was apparent that three issues dominated the discussions. They were the issue of ‘trust’ between the two countries; the Soviet problem and Namibia. Botha raised the first issue within the context of the press reports which had appeared since the November election in the US and to which Crocker referred to as ‘misinformation and disinformation’ on the part of the media.<sup>8</sup> Crocker was of the view that South African distrust of the US grew out of the “1975-1976 experience and the Carter period”.<sup>9</sup> In an attempt to alleviate further suspicion of American intentions, the Assistant Secretary of State provided assurances by alluding to a change in American public opinion on foreign policy since the Reagan victory-thus reversing the trend of the post Vietnam years- pointing to the possibility of improved relations between the US and SA. Botha’s response to this was to request that there be no repeat of Walter

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<sup>5</sup> Randall Robinson, *Defending the Spirit: A Black Life in America*(New York, Plume, 1999), p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> Muntali Interview, 4 December 2002.

<sup>7</sup> *Transafrica News Report*, August 1981.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Mondale's "one-man-one vote" statement.<sup>10</sup> South Africa's assistance was sought in combating Soviet influence in the region and cooperation in resolving the Namibian dilemma. The meeting was concluded with an invitation to Botha to visit the US.

From the briefing documents for the proposed meeting to be held in May 1981 at the State Department in Washington, it was apparent that Secretary of State Alexander Haig, would sit with Pik Botha to continue the discussions began by Crocker in Pretoria a month before, on the new era of friendship between the USA and South Africa. Haig would offer the US assistance to "work to end South Africa's polecat status in the world and seek to restore its place as a legitimate and important regional actor with whom we can cooperate".<sup>11</sup> Drafted by the new Assistant Secretary of State, the new strategy in dealing with the apartheid government would draw the US away from "confrontation" and into a "watershed relationship of 'constructive engagement'".<sup>12</sup>

This new strategy was a significant point in guiding the strategies of the ANC and of the Solidarity groups. For the anti-apartheid groups, "each time the US and South African governments did something, it created new opportunities for us to do something new and to expand our coalition".<sup>13</sup> This brings me to a remark a Reagan Campaign assistant made during the campaign year with regard to the Reagan's knowledge of Southern Africa.. "The problem with Reagan", he added, "is that all he knows about Southern Africa, is that he's on the side of the whites".<sup>14</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, one can only argue for the profound significance of this observation which perhaps encapsulates the policy of "constructive engagement" towards the apartheid regime.

In a nationally televised interview with Walter Cronkite on CBS, undertaken six weeks after his inauguration, Reagan described South Africa as a "friendly nation, a country of strategic consequence to the free world and a wartime ally".<sup>15</sup> On the issue of her being a "friendly nation", comment is unnecessary. His reference to her "strategic consequence" was perhaps not unusual as this area remained the guiding factor in determining the parameters of the US-SA relationship over the years. Perceptions of South Africa's strategic value emerged at different forums and in numerous discussions. For example, in 1977, the influential news bulletin, *Dines Letter*, reported that "South Africa is emerging as a new and unpredictable giant, and will inevitably become a superpower".<sup>16</sup> This deduction was based on the fact that the country controlled 40 percent of the world's uranium reserves, which the publication considered to be "the fuel

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<sup>10</sup> In 1977, Vice President of the Carter administration, Walter Mondale met with John Vorster in Vienna from 9-20 May, This was the first senior level contact between Carter's administration and the apartheid state. During the meeting Mondale demanded "full participation by all of its[South Africa's] citizens on an equal basis". In a press conference Mondale pointed out that there was no difference between full participation and One-man-one-vote.

<sup>11</sup> From verbatim text furnished by *Transafrica*.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, *Defending the Spirit*, p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Cecelie Counts, founding member of the *Southern Africa Summer Project*, 30 November 2002, Washington DC.

<sup>14</sup> *News Report Special Edition*, August 1981.

<sup>15</sup> Robinson, *Defending the Spirit*, p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> Daan Prinsloo, *United States Foreign Policy and the Republic of South Africa*, p. 119. This Newsletter was circulated to businessmen and stock exchange investors throughout the US.

of the future” and 70 percent of the world’s gold reserves which it identified as the “money of the future”.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the news bulletin pointed to the availability of an abundance of land, cheap labour and a combination of “British and Dutch brainpower which it argued were all the vital ingredients of an “economic explosion”.<sup>18</sup> As for being a “wartime” ally, the presidential aides should have briefed him on the sympathy shown by Afrikaners towards Nazi Germany.

In any event, Reagan’s ‘constructive engagement’ policy, which comprised the US policy towards the Third World, had its roots in the Kissinger years, and was clearly expounded by Kissinger during his testimony to the Foreign Relations Committee in 1975, during which he explained the shift in US policy.<sup>19</sup> For the new administration, the events unfolding on the African continent caused much consternation. The collapse of Portuguese rule in Mozambique and Angola had serious repercussions for the Rhodesian dilemma. The pace of resistance activity in South Africa was spurred on by these events as well as by those victories secured through armed struggle in Algeria, Cuba, China and Vietnam. All of these developments, together with the events in Iran still fresh in the minds of the new administration, it was not surprising to learn that the events in Africa were perceived to be urgent and loaded with global repercussions.<sup>20</sup>

Making the apartheid state a partner in its quest to direct the course of events and developments in the Southern African region, would prove to be dangerous to the African states in the region, to the activities for resistance movements such as the African National Congress and to the Solidarity movements within the United States. Equally dangerous was the team which Reagan selected to assist him in the pursuit of his strategic plan for the continent. They included staunch anti-communists such as the first foreign secretary, General Haig whose views on race “put him in the same clubroom with the South African military”.<sup>21</sup> and who “would quietly pretend to beat drums on the table” when African Affairs were brought up for discussion.<sup>22</sup>

Even more pertinent to this discussion on the unholy partnership was the influence of the “Reagan Doctrine”. While ‘Constructive Engagement’ has been used as a framework for the understanding of Reagan’s policy towards Africa, it was the “Reagan Doctrine” that shaped US policy towards all parts of the globe, including Southern Africa. This policy which was developed when the new administration took office in 1981, and which went further than the traditional confines of ‘containment’ of the Soviet Union, remained secret until the spring of 1985. For Sean Gervasi and Sybil Wong, who undertook a critical analysis of this ‘Doctrine’, it was under the terms of this policy that the US, in the 1980’s, “became involved in covert operations, proxy wars, counter insurgencies and

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Mohammed A. El-Khawas(ed.), *National Security Study Memorandum 39. The Kissinger Study of Southern Africa*(Westpoint, Lawrence Hill, 1976), p. 24

<sup>20</sup> This is a reference to the hostage crisis in Iran.

<sup>21</sup> *The New Statesman*, 3 April 1981, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

‘stability operations’ around the world”.<sup>23</sup> And it was this policy that led the US in a secret alliance with the apartheid state to “wage unconventional warfare against the front line states” of the region.<sup>24</sup> It was within the context of this framework that Reagan decided on a position that would be supportive of South Africa, while encouraging the latter to move towards “non-racial liberal democracy”, through the introduction of moderate reforms. He also pledged to assist in the process of resisting all attempts, including that by the United Nations, to isolate South Africa. In relation to activities in the region, the President decided that it would be in both their interests to maintain strict secrecy about ‘active collaboration’ in support of South Africa and about certain actions taken against the frontline states.<sup>25</sup>

All of these developments as well as the public pronouncements on policy coming out of the USA, such as that elucidated by the President in his interview, clearly sent positive signals to the South Africans in Pretoria. This was heightened by the many instances of contact between state officials in Washington and government officials in SA-as indicated by the leaked state department documents.

On 9 March 1981, five senior members of the South African military intelligence met with officials of the National Security Council and Defence Intelligence agency in Washington. The South African delegation included Lt. General P. van der Westhuizen, the Chief of South African military intelligence and Commander Willem du Plesies, the Chief of Naval intelligence. Such meetings caused some embarrassment as they violated the ban on meetings with South African military personnel by state officials.

These meetings which were arranged by John Sears who was a registered agent for South Africa and Reagan’s former campaign manager, demonstrated that a decision had been taken by the new administration to restore military intelligence links between the US and South Africa that were severed by the Carter administration.<sup>26</sup> But evidence has demonstrated that military intelligence links had already been established.

On January 1981, South African commandos stormed an ANC house in a Maputo suburb, killing several members on the ANC. A few hours before earlier, Haig declared that the “war against international terrorism” was a priority of the new administration’s foreign policy.<sup>27</sup> The government of Samora Machel accused US intelligence of providing information to the South Africans on the details of their proposed target. Joaquim Chissano, the Mozambican Minister for Foreign Affairs referred to evidence linking the CIA to the raid.<sup>28</sup> From the evidence it was learned that the CIA had been gathering information amongst others, in the area of ANC activity in Maputo. In fact, a month

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<sup>23</sup> Sean Gervasi and Sybil Wong: “The Reagan Doctrine and the Destabilization of Southern Africa”, in A. George, *Western State Terrorism*(Oxford, Polity Press, 1991),p. 221.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Magubane, “The United States of America and South Africa in the Reagan Era”, unpublished article, 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Gervasi and Wong, “Reagan Doctrine”, p. 217.

<sup>28</sup> Memorandum from Joaquim Alberto Chissano, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Maputo, 19/3/81, in ANC Archives, Mozambique Mission, Boxfile 12.

before the raid, the CIA sought and obtained information related to the location of the ANC houses. The Reagan response to this accusation was to stop food aid to Mozambique at that time which proved to be critical as the country was experience the effects of severe natural disasters.<sup>29</sup> The strengthening of military intelligence links between the USA and SA was a key feature of the USA-SA relationship in the 1980's. Hence the report by the *New York Times*, on 23 July 1986, that the US and British intelligence had been exchanging information with their South African counterparts about the activities of the ANC over a period of time, appeared as no major revelation. According to the report, the exchange was "systematic and regular".<sup>30</sup> On the issue of the kind of information that was exchanged, it was disclosed that these included data such as "political activities, ANC bombing targets and the movement of leaders like Oliver Tambo, in return for South African data on Soviet and Cuban military and political involvement throughout Southern Africa".<sup>31</sup>

In September 1982, William Casey, Director of the CIA, met with military and government leaders in South Africa. The purpose of this meeting, it was learned, was to propose a US backed strategy to secure South Africa's borders. This issue was vital to South Africa's interests as she feared that if neighboring states increased their support for the African National Congress, the country would be subjected to increasing sabotage and cross border raids.

Two months before Casey's visit, Randall Robinson again made available to the Press in Washington another leaked State department classified document which provided vital evidence of South Africa's intention to apply for a new loan from the International Monetary fund.<sup>32</sup> In view of the public disclosure, Secretary of State, Alexander Haig advised South Africa on the adoption of a new strategy which would see her delaying her application until after the World bank meetings took place in Washington in the fall. The scheduled meeting of the International Monetary fund was scheduled for Nov. 4, immediately following after the World Bank meetings. With US support, Haig assured South Africa that the IMF would approve a loan in the amount of \$1.1 billion.<sup>33</sup>

Within a week of the intelligence group's visit to Washington, South African air-force jets destroyed a SWAPO base in Lubango, Angola which lay almost 200 km north of the Angolan-Namibian border. This raid was South Africa's deepest invasion into Angola in six years. A month later, on April 30 1981, the Reagan state, together with Britain and France vetoed four UN Resolutions calling for sanctions against Pretoria. Evidence of such support in the early period of Reagan's tenure, was enough to encourage brutality and oppression on the part of the apartheid state.

Support for the South Africa minority also implied the necessity of ensuring that the African National Congress remained isolated and impeded in its attempts to advance the

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *New York Times*, 23 July 1986.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Muntali Interview, 4 December 2002.

<sup>33</sup> *Transafrica News Report*, Winter 1980/1.

struggle for freedom. It was this need, I would contend, that drove US involvement in the development of the Nkomati Accord with Mozambique and the Disengagement Agreement with Angola.<sup>34</sup> In fact the Reagan administration not only collaborated with the apartheid regime, but it also attempted to jeopardize the ANC image as the legitimate liberation organization of the freedom struggle. Justification for this strategy was provided by the US Deputy Ambassador to the UN, Mr. Liechtenstein, who pointed out that:

We do not perceive South Africa to constitute an external imperialistic threat to even its close neighbours. Destabilisation will remain in force until Angola and Mozambique do not permit their territory to be used by terrorists to attack South Africa. We do not regard the ANC as engaged in a legitimate quest for power. Nine out of ten deaths inflicted by ANC terrorists action in South Africa are blacks. And the Pretoria government is certainly a more legitimate government than the Soviet government.<sup>35</sup>

Further evidence of US attempts to paralyse the activities of the ANC could be found even in statements coming directly from the White House. On 22 July 1986, the US President accused the ANC of “calculated terror” and expressed the view that the “South African government is under no obligation to negotiate the future of the country with any organization that proclaims a goal of creating a communist state and uses terrorist tactics to achieve it”.<sup>36</sup>

Attempts to destroy the legitimacy of the ANC continued in 1982 with the hearings organized by the sub-committee of the US Senate on Security and Terrorism. Under the Chairmanship of Jeremiah Denton, the mandate of the sub-committee was to investigate the role of the Soviet Union in “forming and supporting terrorism in Southern Africa”.<sup>37</sup> Through the testimony of ‘witnesses’, it sought to establish the extent through which the USSR had successfully penetrated and ‘taken over’ the ANC and SWAPO.<sup>38</sup> Essentially what the committee was expected to do was to justify the administration’s perception of the ANC being a ‘terrorist’ movement’, that was supported by the Soviet Union. For Alfred Nzo, the Secretary-General of the ANC, the work of the Committee was a futile exercise as the ANC and the Soviet Union made no secret of the fact that the latter as well as the Socialist community supported the ANC.<sup>39</sup>

1984 was a particularly bleak year in all respects for the ANC and the Solidarity movement. Events on both sides of the Atlantic did not bode well for advancing the struggle locally as well as internationally. In that year Reagan won a second term of office through a landslide victory. This victory was a startling revelation that the

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<sup>34</sup> Magubane, “USA and South Africa”, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Johannesburg Financial Mail*, 25 November 1983.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Magubane, “USA and South Africa”, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Jeremiah Denton left America in the 60’s. “Believing” in the Vietnam War, he spent seven years and seven months as a POW after being shot down over North Vietnam and captured on 18 July 1965.

<sup>38</sup> The ANC considered these to be unreliable witnesses as they represented those segments of the movement who were former ANC students and MK cadres who had become ‘renegades’.

<sup>39</sup> Alfred Nzo, during discussions with activists in Oakland. Related by Counts. The work of this Sub-Committee was well documented in *Sechaba*, May 1982.

American public was content with the existing administration as well as with its foreign policy direction. According to sources within the movement, who were based in Lusaka at the time, the possibility of winning the support of the US state department and the American public seemed doomed. Given the hostility that pervaded Washington, it was apparent that the ANC could not leverage any support nor shape the debates that took place over South Africa. They therefore appealed to the anti-apartheid lobby to take on that Herculean role of turning the tide of support in Washington. But even for the solidarity groups, this was a crippling time for their activities. Cecelie Counts, recalled hearing from Black South Africans that “when Reagan was re-elected, whites were dancing in the streets” and reassuring themselves that “they were safe for another four years”.<sup>40</sup>

For PW Botha, these events served to strengthen his notion that the position of South Africa was favoured. This was reinforced by developments arising out of his introduction, a year before, of his new constitutional proposals or ‘moderate reforms’. These proposals, which made provision for a Tricameral Parliament with limited representation for South Africa’s Indian and Coloured population, excluded the country’s Black population from representation. On Wednesday, 2 November 1983, two million white voters, about seventy five percent of all eligible white voters, went to the polls and through a referendum, granted Botha their approval for his new constitutional proposals. Reaction from those allied to the apartheid state was not unusual. The US State Department welcomed the results of the referendum as did a large segment of the South African and American business community. For a euphoric PW Botha, the results vindicated him and strengthened his resolved “to go ahead with proper and evolutionary reform” without bringing Blacks into the central government in any way. But the United Democratic Front(UDF) dismissed the results of the referendum held for the purposes of setting up what it considered to be “a bogus parliament”.<sup>41</sup>

The activities of this movement, which was launched as a national organization at a rally of seven thousand people in Cape Town on 20 August 1983, would eventually proved crucial to the solidarity groups in the USA, the ANC and to the despondent South African majority. Writing on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the organisation’s birth, Frank Chikane, former General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, explained that the UDF represented but one pillar of a four pronged strategy to bring the apartheid regime to its knees.<sup>42</sup> Armed struggle, sanctions and the mobilization of the international community against apartheid and the development of the internal political underground were representative of the other three pillars of the new strategy. The genesis of the UDF was a call by the ANC in exile for all South Africans to form a united front to resist the regime which was becoming more repressive and brutal in the run-up to the implementation of the new “bogus” tricameral parliament under a new South African constitution. The implementation of Botha’s new constitution in 1984 resulted in organizations such as the UDF moving beyond strategies of protest to causing situations

<sup>40</sup> Counts Interview, 30 November 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Kinloch Massie, *Loosing the Bonds: The United States and South Africa in the Apartheid Years*(New York, Doubleday, 1997),p. 552.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Chikane, *The Natal Mercury*, 20 August 2003.

of “ungovernability”.<sup>43</sup> As such notions of mass resistance took root in South Africa, evidence suggests that the apartheid state apparatus not only rapidly lost control of the situations in the Black townships but if found itself unable to monitor the activities of the UDF.<sup>44</sup>

On September 3, a few months after launch of the UDF and just before Reagan’s re-election, Prime Minister PW Botha implemented his set of moderate reforms. This resulted in protest action in Black townships throughout the country. Twenty nine Blacks were killed near Johannesburg alone. Within a few weeks, Botha ordered the arrest of the country’s Black trade union leadership. These events were not lost to the international community who were taken by surprise. In the UN, the General Assembly voted on a nonbinding resolution that condemned the arrests. The resolution was passed with an overwhelming majority. But the United States of America had abstained.

Given the brutality of the South African state and the increasing numbers of deaths, instances of torture, detention and harassment of activist in the country, it was considered unacceptable by many that the US should abstain. In trying to explore the mood of the time, I have found that the US abstention proved crucial to work of the Washington network. It was a critical time that marked a turning point in the history of the movement’s work. For Randall Robinson, as with many other US activists, this was the last straw. Such action was considered a blatant betrayal by their country which was described as a “two-faced democracy” and a “peacock that would not see itself”.<sup>45</sup> Barely two months before this, Thabo Mbeki had visited the US. During his stay in the US, he met with Robinson and addressed groups such as Transafrica imploring them to make “American officials listen” to the voices of South Africa’s oppressed.<sup>46</sup> Yet the existence of a toxic cocktail of apartheid brutality and US created much embarrassment and disappointment for these activists who recognized their failure to respond to Mbeki’s appeal. After many discussions and meetings of the group, agreement was reached on the need for an aggressive course of action. And it was at this point that Robinson and his colleagues at Transafrica hatched the plan to enter the embassy in Washington and to stage a sit in to draw the attention of the US public and State Department to the real plight of the oppressed.

For many activists such as Cecelie Counts, this situation together with the television images of police brutality being beamed from South Africa on local TV stations, made them realize “that they had to do something different”.<sup>47</sup> Hence Robinson was able to draw support from such quarters. Relying on the support network in Washington, Counts succeeded in lobbying support from the Churches, student groups and community organizations—all of whom stood by to lend their support to Robinson and his group as they left the embassy under escort by six uniformed US Secret Service Officers for their

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Jeremy Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983-1991* (David Philip, Cape Town, 2000), p. 23.

<sup>45</sup> Robinson, *Defending the Spirit*, p. 147.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Counts, 30 November 2002. After the formation of the Free South Africa Movement, Counts took on the position of coordinator of demonstrations for the movement.

journey to prison. It was this group again that was there to welcome the group out of prison, upon their release on Thanksgiving morning. And the next day, the *Free South Africa* movement was formed.

The formation of this movement proved to be an effective strategy to alert the Washington community as well as the others to the plight of South Africa's disenfranchised majority. Counts recalled the daily demonstrations that were held for almost a year outside the South African embassy, with arrests taking place every weekend. She also provided a vivid account of the commitment of demonstrators to the South African cause, by explaining how, on some days, Massachusetts Avenue would be lined with up to five thousand demonstrators, in spite of the cold and snow.

Randall Robinson's recollection of those that came to Washington to demonstrate reveals not only this commitment, alluded to by Counts, but also the growing strength of the solidarity network. Gay MacDougall of the Lawyers for Civil Rights, brought thousands of lawyers to demonstrate; John Jacob brought the Urban National League; a clergyman drove a bus load of supporters from the mid-west; mayors like Coleman Young from Detroit were arrested; Coretta Scott King was taken away with her children; Rory Kennedy and her brother Douglas were arrested; Senator Edward Kennedy came to address the crowds; every member of the Congressional Black Caucus, except two, were arrested; Stevie Wonder was handcuffed at the embassy; Jesse Jackson was arrested; Lowell Weicker, a Republican from Connecticut became the first and only US Senator ever arrested in an act of Civil Disobedience.<sup>48</sup>

While the list of those arrested reads like the 'Who's Who' of the celebrity group of society, the majority of those who participated in these demonstrations as well as those that took place throughout the country were purely volunteers, people who "cared a lot but had been involved in their own work as well".<sup>49</sup> Much their time was made available in the evenings or on weekends. But the involvement of 'celebrity' activists was effective in drawing the attention of the American media to the work of the anti-apartheid group. Mwiza Munthali's description of the American media carried a tone of sharp cynicism, referring to them as being "fickle and crisis driven". But as I later learned, such cynicism was not unjustified. Drawing the interest of the media required creativity and effort on the part of the movement.. If that meant glamorizing the work of the movement, it had to be done. And to hold their interest, demonstrations had to comprise of large gatherings of activists involved in 'innovative activity'.<sup>50</sup>

One example of such 'innovative activity' took place in August 1985, just after South Africa imposed a state of emergency and banned public funerals. Paul Newman, Jesse Jackson, major civil rights and labour leaders joined 10 000 people in a 'funeral march' to the State Department to protest the Reagan administration's policy of "constructive engagement". They carried black cardboard coffins in memory of those killed in South

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<sup>48</sup> Robinson, *Defending the Spirit*, P. 156; *Transafrica Issue Brief*, FSAM.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Counts.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Muntali.

Africa in the last eleven months of unrest.<sup>51</sup> Munthali recalled the situation where US activists began building and spray painting coffins in their home-much to the horror of their neighbours- for a mock funeral to draw attention in the US to this form of police brutality. This march was a successful ‘gimmick’ which kept the press and television enthralled and eager to capture this event.

An interesting assessment of the American mainstream media was provided fellow journalist, Roger Wilkins in an interview which he gave to *Transafrica* in 1985. This interview was useful in understanding the dynamics that pervaded the media sector at the time. According to Wilkins, since the implementation of Botha’s new constitutional dispensation, mainstream American press coverage of South Africa “has been steady”.<sup>52</sup> But he conveyed his dissatisfaction with the quality of the media coverage especially during the 1984-1985 years. Using the birth of the FSAM as an example, he pointed out that that event was the “most important initiative undertaken by black private citizens since Martin Luther King died and the most successful”. Yet the media did not perceive it in that light. He drew attention to coverage provided by columnists such as Joseph Kraft and Richard Cohen who wrote “that[ the FSAM] was “just a bunch of civil rights people who should stick to [protesting] budget cuts in domestic programmes”.<sup>53</sup> But when the movement’s influence succeeded in pervading 28 cities, articles in major magazines like *Newsweek* and *People* conveyed a perception of a spontaneous movement that “sprang full grown from the consciousness of white America” when in fact “black Americans created it, started it and kept it alive”. For him it was easy for editors to initially dismiss South Africa issue because it involved the oppression of people “who are not like you and who do not look like you”<sup>54</sup>

While the anti-apartheid movement spread throughout the country with demonstrations taking place in California, New York, Boston, Houston, Chicago and Pittsburgh, for activists in South Africa all of this activity taking place across the Atlantic appeared to be glamorous and exciting. This was not so. While there may have been many high moments, activists also referred to the many low moments as well. Counts, who was at the embassy every day, explained the lows when the turnout on the coldest days would “shrink beyond our ability to form a small circle of pickets” and that by month nine, symptoms of ‘picketitis’ set in.<sup>55</sup>

In the meanwhile, another related movement-the Divestment Movement- began to grow at a rapid rate in response to developments in South Africa and in response to pressure from local anti-apartheid groups. In the state of Connecticut, several divestment protests occurred at university campuses which in turn led to the formation of the Connecticut Anti-Apartheid Committee(CAAC). Comprised of a core group of about 6-10 people, who worked from their homes on a very low budget, the CAAC group worked for almost

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<sup>51</sup> *New York Times*, 13 August 1985.

<sup>52</sup> *Transafrica Forum Issue Brief*, June-July 1985.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> This was a term used by activists to describe a ‘disease’ which caused one to walk in circles even when not on demonstration or protest.

two years to educate people of the state about the evils of apartheid and to build a statewide network. This was done through the distribution of printed material, speaking opportunities, newspaper articles and conferences and social events. For example, in June 1980, the CAAC held a dinner for about 200 people to mark the fourth anniversary of the Soweto uprising. Dumisani Khumalo, a South African who worked for the American Committee on Africa was invited to address guests. Khumalo used this opportunity to urge guests to pressurize American companies to divest from South Africa.<sup>56</sup>

A simultaneous development was the introduction in 1981 of two bills by anti-apartheid legislators in the state legislature calling for the sale of all state investments in corporations or banks conducting business with the apartheid institutions in South Africa. The CAAC played a critical role in this initiative by organizing a lobbying campaign which saw leaders of community groups, labour unions, religious groups and black organisations being brought to the state capitol. In spite of shock expressed by the business community, the bill passed through both houses with more than the two thirds majority. For the CAAC this was a victory, but it was to be a short lived one as only two weeks later the Divestment Bill suffered a veto by Governor O' Neill.<sup>57</sup> A year later, on June 9 1982, an amended version of the bill passed again through both houses and was finally signed into law by O'Neill. But the passing of this bill into law would not have been possible without the work of the CAAC which was galvanized into action by the 1981 veto.<sup>58</sup> The Divestment issue in Connecticut and the work of the CAAC drew the attention of state representatives in other parts of the country. With the result, by the end of 1982, cities such as Philadelphia, Wilmington and Grand Rapids and states such as Connecticut, Massachusetts and Michigan had approved the divestment of \$250 million in public money.<sup>59</sup>

While much of this chapter focuses on the Washington based lobby groups, the work of the American Committee on Africa(ACOA), the oldest anti-apartheid organization in the United States, also merits scrutiny for it contributed to much of the developments in Washington and in the rest of the country, in driving action against South Africa. In 1981, Jennifer Davis succeeded George Houser as executive Director of ACOA. In that year, Davis together with Dumisani Khumalo and other activists spent much of that year organizing the public investment conference, which was funded by various churches and individuals. The conference was attended by nearly 200 union leaders, anti-apartheid activists, city officials, financial experts and state legislators on June 12, 1981.<sup>60</sup> In a speech at the Church Centre, Julian Bond from Georgia leveled criticism at the Reagan administration and appealed to the conference participants to “end American investment in evil”.<sup>61</sup> This speech, together with workshops which were held on the following day

<sup>56</sup> Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, p. 531.

<sup>57</sup> This was done in response to pressure from the business community that the bill was too vague and could adversely affect business in Connecticut.

<sup>58</sup> Such action included soliciting the support of organizations such as Jesse Jackson's OPERATION PUSH and Hartford's Black Ministerial Alliance.

<sup>59</sup> Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, p. 535.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Jennifer Davis, 9 December 2002, New York City.

<sup>61</sup> Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, p. 481.

and the final plenary session which was critical in eliciting the commitment of participants to act, proved effective. According to Davis and other activists like Richard Knight, the legislators were so “fired up” by the conference resolutions and discussions that when they returned home, every one filed a divestment bill.<sup>62</sup>

The work of the ACOA continued on the East Coast of the US And was evident in their work in the formation of MassDivest, an anti-apartheid coalition which comprised organizations such as the Black Ecumenical Council, the Catholic archdiocese of Boston, the Massachusetts Council of Churches, the Massachusetts Teachers Association, the local chapter of Transafrica, the American Federation of State County and Municipal employees and other sympathetic groups and which was devoted to seeking a policy of total divestment.<sup>63</sup> Employing the same strategies as their colleagues in Connecticut, and applying the necessary pressure on State House through Representative Mel King of Boston and Jack Backman, a white liberal senator, Mass Divest was successful in ensuring that the full divestment bill affecting \$91 million in state investments, became law in January 1983.<sup>64</sup>

With the support of the new Governor of Massachusetts, Michael Dukakis, the law was rapidly implemented and within nine months, Massise pointed out, \$68 million dollars in investments in companies doing business in South Africa, had been sold off.

Events in Boston had been so heartening for Davis and the ACOA that they decided to hold the second national conference on Public Investment and South Africa in that city. The conference took place in April 1983 and brought together the same constituency as that present at the first conference. Seizing the opportunities created by the mood of this conference Davis and Khumalo and other staff members of ACOA, criss-crossed the United States to spread the work about divestment. For example in 1983, Khumalo traveled to the three states of Nebraska, Rhode Island and Nevada, Davis addressed the National Association of State Treasurers and Gail Hovey testified before the Illinois House of Representatives.<sup>65</sup> They also initiated a newsletter called *Public Investment and South Africa*.<sup>66</sup>

Using the euphoric mood that seemed to pervade efforts to heighten awareness of the South African situation, ACOA focused on corporate ethics and constructive engagement. Writing for the Washington Post on 21 May 1983, Davis pointed out:

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<sup>62</sup> Interviews with Jennifer Davis, 9 December 2002, Richard Knight, 11 December 2002, New York City, Frank Ferrari, 11 December 2002, New York City.

<sup>63</sup> This policy entailed the selling of all stocks and bonds from every company and bank conducting business in South Africa.

<sup>64</sup> Mel King was a leading Black politician and a member of the Black caucus. This bill was originally vetoed by Governor Edward King, a conservative, in 1982, who toned down the main provisions of the bill. King and Buckman refused to accept the amended version of the bill and forced through ‘a stunning override’ of the bill in both houses which was opposed by the Governor. But in spite of this opposition, it became law.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Davis, 9 December 2002.

<sup>66</sup> According to Massie, this newsletter was effective because it reached more than 600 legislators and divestment activists.

Whatever the original intention of Leon Sullivan, the author of the principles, the principles have been an extremely useful tool for the South African government and the corporations...Instead of discussing the role that the corporations play in supplying the government with vital products and technology, the debate focuses on the working conditions...of workers who represent fewer than one percent of the black labour force...what the state fears is not a code of conduct that makes it easier for foreign corporations to stay , but pressure on them to pull out.<sup>67</sup>

The activities of the Free South Africa and the other anti-apartheid lobby groups heightened awareness in the United States of the plights of South Africa Blacks with the result that the apartheid became a broad based concern in the US. According to the Washington-based Investor Responsibility Research Centre, five American Companies, including General Electric and the VF Corporation, which made Lee blue jeans, pulled out of South Africa since January 1986. In 1985, thirty eight American Companies stopped doing business with South Africa. In 1984, only six stopped doing business. A spokesman for the centre said 267 were continuing with their South African operations. AT the end of 1984, American companies had \$1.8 billion tied up in South African interests, but by, 1985, he added, the figure had dropped considerably. But for Catherine Hargrove, a Free South Africa campaigner, “corporate campaigns were not traditionally short...people understand what kind of struggle its going to be...we’re prepared to go the distance with it”<sup>68</sup>

The ANC has always taken the credit for winning the battle on the international battleground and has continued to play down the role of the anti-apartheid groups. But evidence has indicated the contrary-that the anti-apartheid lobby created the right climate for the ANC in the US especially in Washington, and so doing, succeeded in driving a wedge between the apartheid state and the State Department. This was clear from the preceding discussion which demonstrated the effectiveness of this group in raising awareness in the US of the ANC’s plight and of clearing the way for the organisation’s recognition as a legitimate liberation movement. This was done by facilitating more contact between ANC leaders and officials in Washington and corporate representatives. It also needs to be emphasized that in spite of the anti-west rhetoric, the ANC realized the importance of winning over official support from Washington and of using civil society to reach their government. In fact, just after Reagan’s election, Secretary-general Alfred Nzo visited the USA in November of 1980. Addressing a banquet in Oakland he appealed for the support of “progressive forces” in the US for this was critical in the process of applying “concerted pressure” for the imposition of mandatory economic sanctions” on the apartheid regime.<sup>69</sup>

As a result of changing attitudes more people were willing to meet with leaders such as Oliver Tambo and Thabo Mbeki who made visits to the US between 1980 and 1987. But this was not the case with the State Department and the White House-until September 1986 when Crocker met with Tambo in London. At the invitation of Transafrica and the

<sup>67</sup> *The Washington Post*, 21 may 1983.

<sup>68</sup> *The New York Times*, 10 May 1986, *Transafrica* Press Cutting Collection.

<sup>69</sup> Alfred Nzo, “The new offensive against Apartheid”, in *World Magazine*, 13 December 1980, P. 3.

Southern Africa Support group, Tambo visited the US in June 1981 to attend a conference of Black leaders in Washington in response to Reagan's policies on Southern Africa.<sup>70</sup> While in Washington, Transafrica arranged separate meetings with representatives of Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate Sub-committees on Africa. A meeting was also held at the editorial offices of the Washington Post.<sup>71</sup>

Activists such as Cecelie Counts, Mwiza Munthali and Bill Minter recalled meeting with Tambo where issues such as strengthening the links between the liberation organizations and the Solidarity movements was held. After the Washington meetings, Tambo, accompanied by Randall Robinson, headed off to Atlanta for meetings with Mayor Lowery, Senator Julian Bond, Coretta Scott King and Andrew Young. The visit was concluded with an address delivered to a session of the UN Special Committee on Apartheid, which was chaired by Ambassador Akpokorode Clark, the Nigerian Ambassador to the UN and the Chair of the Special Committee. After his visits, Tambo agreed on the effectiveness and strength of "our firm and dedicated allies in the United States" and on the need to maintain the "consistent fights on both sides" to guarantee that plots hatched by Pretoria can be defeated.<sup>72</sup>

In October of the same year a conference was held by the Churches in New York City in co-sponsorship with the ANC and SWAPO to assess the impact of the links between the SA state and the US government.. Alfred Nzo led the ANC delegation to the conference which came up with the historic New York declaration which stated that:

We have a special responsibility to play...it is our government that keeps apartheid alive, feeds it, oils it and arms it. The heroics people of the ANC and SWAPO are destroying apartheid from within , but we can end our government's pact with racism, which if not obliterated, will destroy us all. This conference proudly takes up this fight and joins the peoples of the world.<sup>73</sup>

In 1983 Tambo again visited the US as a guest of Transafrica. For activists, the visits by ANC leaders was an effective strategy in drawing the interest of American civil society which was image driven. Hence calls such as "Oliver Tambo is coming. Come and see a real liberation leader" provided the crowds needed to fill the halls. Tambo remained the favorite of the US public, but as argued earlier on, he was still not the favorite of the State Department, which preferred contact with the UDF and COSATU. The reason for this was their understanding that these organizations were more moderate and less militant. They had failed to accept that the UDF was formed in response to the ANC's call and that there was a strong bond between these two, which had to be denied at the time.

Perhaps the most significant visit to the US was that undertaken by Tambo in 1987 in response to the first invitation from the White House to meet, not with Reagan but with

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with Muntali.

<sup>71</sup> This visit was well documented by *Sechaba* in its July 1981 issue.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Sechaba*, January 1982.

Secretary of State George Shultz.<sup>74</sup> This meeting was arranged by Crocker and was expected after Shultz's testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on July 23 1986 during which he drew attention to their intention to "raise the level and frequency of our contact with the South African government's black opposition-among-others-the African National Congress."<sup>75</sup> After meeting with Shultz, Tambo met with Henry Kissinger, who was appointed by Reagan to the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board of the Presidency. Neo Moikangoa, who was an ANC representative in the US at that time shared his recollections of this meeting which he attended together with Tambo. He recalled Kissinger's 'advice' to Tambo on official perceptions of the ANC and of Tambo. He[Kissinger] pointed out that "so long as you are weak, so long as you have no prospect of leading, you are not in a position to dictate what people shall call you". Using the example of Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, he went further to explain that "we in the United States used to call him a terrorist and a communist, but all that has changed".<sup>76</sup> All of these initiatives were driven by the solidarity link.

During a press conference held at the conclusion of the Kabwe Conference in June 1985, the ANC claimed that the process of isolating South Africa was rapidly gaining pace. It was even closer than before to fulfilling its main foreign policy objectives to mobilize the support of the international community for South Africa's isolation and to gain international recognition as the only legitimate representative of the country's oppressed. In fact by 1986, with the passing of the CAAA and the official state contacts being made between the ANC and the US government, I would contend that the situation was already in place, with the battle for the American turf already in the ANC's favour. At the same time. I would reiterate my view that this was not possible without the work undertaken by the solidarity groups in the US who succeeded, through their activities and strategies in moving the ANC from the fringe of American politics to the mainstream. For I have demonstrated through evidence presented that on its own the ANC was unable to shape the political debates in Washington. This was a common view shared by all activists interviewed for the purposes of this study. Many went further to claim that the ANC had no voice in Washington and that Transafrica was the voice of the ANC. It was also their view that the ANC would not have been able to push through the CAAA without its collaboration with the solidarity groups. While these views may convey some dissatisfaction with attempts by the ANC to play down the role the anti-apartheid groups in the freedom struggle, I will not tackle that area of dissent, which seems to characterize the relationship between these two movements today.

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I would like to conclude with the view that while my paper may have provided the solidarity groups with a rather high profile in the struggle history, I would like to

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<sup>74</sup> This are virtually no details available of what transpired at the meeting or of the logistical arrangements for this meeting. As Chester Crocker was present, arrangements have been made for a future interview with him to discuss the details of this meeting.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted By Magubane in "USA and South Africa", p. 19.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Neo Moikangoa conducted by Inga-Dorothee Rost, on 18 April 1997, Pretoria.

add the following cautionary comment. Any attempt to understand the liberation struggle during this period, must take into account the limitations and difficulties of the movement during this period, which have been alluded to in previous chapters of my work.