

By Pippa Green

UNITED STATES POLICY TOWARD THE Southern African subcontinent has undergone its most significant shift since the decolonization of most of Africa two decades ago. It is a shift beset by contradictions and policy is still in flux. But for the first time in more than a quarter century the U.S. has officially acknowledged the central place of the popular African National Congress (ANC) in the struggle against apartheid in white-ruled South Africa.

The change was noted by ANC President Oliver Tambo when he spoke in January at a reception held in his honor in New York. Addressing some of the city's most powerful businessmen, financiers and policy makers Tambo recalled "how far we have traveled since the day when I first met the American Committee on Africa in 1952 to discuss their support for us in the Defiance Campaign against racially discriminatory laws in South Africa."

January's meeting between Secretary of State George Shultz and Tambo was the first official U.S. recognition accorded to the ANC since it was outlawed by the South African government 27 years ago. The meeting went ahead despite the fact that the ANC has not changed two tenets of its policy which the U.S. government has pointed to as unpalatable: endorsement of armed struggle and its alliance with the South African Communist Party.

**The right to fight:** Tambo made clear a week before he met with Shultz that the controversial positions had not changed. Addressing about 3,000 people who had crowded into a Manhattan church to hear the exiled leader, he said: "No one has the right to demand peaceful behavior of us until we are free. Furthermore, no one should demand that we seek change through non-violent means when all constitutional avenues to redress grievances are denied to the majority in South Africa."

And in a clear reference to the State Department's discomfort with the ANC's political allies, Tambo argued that "the struggles of people in South Africa must be supported on their own terms. The democrats of the United States should support our struggle by allowing us the right to have our history, our own national expression and the right to decide what is best for us." He chastised "people who are making it a condition of support that we reproduce ourselves in their own image."

So when Tambo met with Shultz it was not as a consequence of renunciation of previous policies or practices. Where, then, does the change come from?

Principally, from changes within South Africa itself, says Bill Minter, author of *King Solomon's Mines Revisited*, a major new study on U.S. foreign policy toward southern Africa, "It is now clear to anyone that the ANC is one of the major parties to deal with."

And Jennifer Davis, director of the oldest anti-apartheid group in the U.S., the American Committee on Africa, also attributes the symbolic shift to the "rapidly changing events inside South Africa and the growing strength of the movement here."

But anti-apartheid campaigners in the U.S. are wary about proclaiming any major change of heart on the part of the State Department toward the liberation movement in South Africa.

The recent Shultz Committee report on



## SOUTH AFRICA

ANC President Tambo on relations with the U.S.: "How far we have traveled."

# U.S. shifts its approach to African National Congress

South Africa denounced President Reagan's policy of "constructive engagement." Keeping close ties with the white-minority Pretoria government was a failure. The report recommended an international program of economic sanctions if Pretoria remains intransigent. But Minter warns that "the shift only goes so far. The Shultz Committee uses cautious language and their view is definitely not the view of the administration." Rather, he says, the administration has adopted the position of the three committee members who signed a minority report.

**Minority opinion:** The three, General Motors Chairman Roger Smith, former Undersecretary of State Laurence Eagleburger and former Republican Congressman John Dellenback, argued that increased sanctions against South Africa were "wasteful and counterproductive."

As Minter explains: "The guiding principle of policy toward South Africa until now has been that Pretoria is an ally to be encouraged on the road to reform rather than an enemy to be forced. If the advice of the committee were taken it would significantly shift that position."

But the committee's report—and, indeed, Tambo's reception in the U.S.—has put previous policy under a spotlight. This is partly as a result of the U.S. anti-apartheid movement's effective and high-powered campaign in response to escalating conflict in South Africa. The movement has changed the parameters of the South Africa debate. Economic sanctions are no longer a fringe, radical demand, but part of the debate of the political mainstream.

"We believe," said the committee, which was appointed by the State Department in 1985 in an attempt to ward off sanctions, "that the urgency of the situation demands...a multilateral program of sanctions...unless the South African government releases all political prisoners, unbans the ANC

...and terminates the state of emergency" by October this year.

It is the "unless" and the deadline which worry anti-apartheid campaigners. "It is significant that they are no longer taking the position that sanctions are impossible, but they are still playing around with 'ifs,'" said Davis. And two committee members, United Auto Workers (UAW) President Owen Beiber and Rev. Leon Sullivan, author of the Sullivan Principles for U.S. firms in South Africa, also believed the report was too cautious. "It is a significant rebuff to the policy of 'constructive engagement,'" said a UAW spokesman after the report's release, "but it does not go nearly far enough to dismantle apartheid."

Beiber also recommended an immediate end to U.S. military aid to the Angolan rebel movement UNITA, which is also backed by the South African government. The committee noted only that U.S. backing of UNITA and "the failure to deliver a long-promised settlement in Namibia" had alienated South African blacks from the U.S.

**The Frontline connection:** It is not clear whether or how the State Department will implement the committee's recommendation to give development aid to the Frontline States—an alliance of black-ruled nations in southern Africa (see *In These Times*, Feb. 18). But the crucial connection between U.S. anti-apartheid policy and policy toward other countries in the subcontinent has been made.

Minter points out that all other countries in southern Africa—even those that have co-operated with South Africa—have been militarily attacked by Pretoria. Angola and Mozambique have been particular targets in what Pretoria says are its efforts to wipe out the ANC. Certainly in the case of Angola, Minter argues, the U.S.—by example—gave South Africa a green light to intervene.

The anti-apartheid movement will campaign to increase U.S. support for the

Frontline States. But because the right wing is quick to portray southern Africa as a Cold War arena, it might prove a more arduous task than even the imposition of sanctions against South Africa.

"It all depends how it's argued," says Minter. "The fact is that the majority of U.S. politicians know little or nothing about southern Africa and it is not an exaggeration to say that a considerable number of congressmen would be unable to locate Angola or Mozambique on a map. So a vote is less likely to be weighted by an analysis of the situation than by whether the issue is portrayed as one about racism or one about communism."

A supposed battle against communism is the crux of the right wing's pressure on the State Department not to acknowledge the ANC. Jeane Kirkpatrick, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, rapped the State Department in a recent *New York Times* column for "actively contributing to the reputation and legitimization of the ANC and making it a principle alternative to apartheid."

**The Inkatha option:** Shriller warnings about communism emanate from a church group in Kentucky, which for the past few weeks have been distributing free of charge an anti-ANC "Action Package," consisting of literature, a professionally made video entitled *ANC: A Time for Candor and Clarion Call*, a glossy magazine published by Chief Gatsha Buthelezi's Inkatha organization, a Zulu group billed by the U.S. government as "moderate."

While some of the "Action Package" might be dismissed as fringe right-wing agitation, its cries have resonances in the American body politic. It is perhaps no coincidence that pro-Inkatha literature is distributed in the same package. Inkatha has long been promoted by the Reagan administration and its supporters as the viable alternative to both apartheid and the ANC in South Africa.

The committee's report and Shultz's meeting with Tambo indicate that the "Inkatha option" is being reconsidered. U.S. officials and the AFL-CIO's American Africa Labor Center (AALC) watched closely when Chief Buthelezi launched his pro-investment, pro-free enterprise union, United Workers Union of South Africa (UWUSA), as a rival to the 600,000-strong Congress of South African Trade Unions. But as 1986 wore on the Inkatha union failed to attract not only non-Zulu workers but the majority of unionized Zulu workers, too.

There are signs, too, that the State Department is adopting a more pragmatic approach to the ANC's alliance with the South African Communist Party. In its report on the subject, the State Department concluded that if ANC's relations with Western countries improved, or if Pretoria conceded to negotiations, "serious policy differences [between the nationalists and the communists] could surface within the ANC."

The anti-apartheid movement sees its battle to isolate and weaken apartheid as just beginning. There was hope in the ANC leader's voice when he spoke at the New York reception: "The struggle in South Africa has been very rough the past two years. But it is precisely in the past two years that we have found apartheid's weakness, because it is at the moment of its extreme brutality that the people of [the U.S.] have realized that it is a monster they can help kill." □

Pippa Green is a South African journalist who has written for the *South African Labour Bulletin*, the *Weekly Mail* of Johannesburg and the *Argus* of Cape Town. She is currently based in New York.



# PILGRIMS FOR PROGRESS



A white rabbi  
and a black minister  
— both South African —  
tell U.S. audiences that  
the only answer to  
apartheid is democracy.



By Russell Miller

**S**ABBATH SERVICES ARE OVER, THE BLESSINGS over wine and bread have been made and the social hall of Manhattan's Temple B'nai Jeshurun is pleasantly buzzing with the usual Saturday morning chats: kids, condo, the week's events.

Several congregants stand around one of the guest speakers, Rabbi Ben Isaacson of Congregation Har-El in Johannesburg, South Africa, to thank him for his moving talk and to express support for his good work. Since the end of January, Rabbi Isaacson has been traveling across the U.S. with Rev. Zachariah Mokgoebo, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in Soweto. They preach—a white rabbi and a black minister—a common message: the only answer to apartheid is democracy, and democracy in South Africa means black majority rule.

One voice jumps out of the hum in the social hall. The accent is South African, but not Rabbi Isaacson's:

"There are just as many decent white people in South Africa as there are decent black people, and you don't say that. That's not important to you." Well-wishers cringe back, leaving Isaacson and his tall challenger at the center of a tense little circle. "With all that whites have done for blacks, with all

the progress that's been made, you want them to give everything up."

"No," Isaacson retorts. "I want them to give it back."

The challenger leans in, snarling. "That's bullshit. Bullshit."

Then someone takes the challenger's arm, ushers him out of the hall; the reception continues. A half-hour later, Rabbi Isaacson is on West 88th Street, telling the story to Rev. Mokgoebo.

"Zach, you didn't see him, the dirty little racist—I wanted to hit him. It's a good thing you weren't there—the little pig." And the elegantly dressed rabbi who has traveled halfway around the world to deliver a plea for human rights opens his mouth, sticks in his finger, pretends to gag. And breaks up laughing.

It's a movement laugh—the kind you laugh when you're safe among friends, and the enemy's far away and can't hurt you, and you know you're right and the enemy's a fool and you know you're going to win. It's the laugh of the righteous. These days, in synagogues, churches and meeting halls across the U.S., Ben Isaacson is sounding very righteous. Listen to him preach:

"I say to the Jewish people, 'You want the Torah, you accept the First Commandment: 'I am the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.' God's a liberator god. God is a political god. That's a political statement if ever there was one—we don't have to argue about liberation theology. Or else make up your mind! Give the Commandment back! Tell God you only want nine!"

**On a mission:** Rabbi Isaacson and Rev. Mokgoebo are talking with blacks and Jews in 23 cities across the U.S. They're preaching to congregations, briefing community lead-

ers and meeting privately with philanthropists who may give them money to open an interfaith, interracial "Center for Religion and Peace" in Johannesburg. They've made their pitches so many times that, as Isaacson said to one group, "we got confused the other night and gave each other's speeches."

It was a good warm-up line, but no one bought it. Ben Isaacson and Zachariah Mokgoebo may be working together, but they're working two different jobs.

In South Africa, Rev. Mokgoebo is in sync with his public. He's a religious leader, a government opponent and a supporter of his people. When he speaks, he bears witness to the tension and the struggle and the daily dilemmas of a religious life under apartheid. "What do you do," he asks, "when students come to you with a tire in one hand and a five-liter gasoline can in the other hand and they say, 'Reverend, this person is a collaborator and we've got evidence—what must we do with him?' It's a question," Mokgoebo says, "of credibility."

Rabbi Isaacson is in the same struggle. But he is, in his words, "not even on the fringe" of his community. He says that speaking against apartheid has lost him his pulpit three times in three different congregations. He says, "It's a number of years now that I've wanted to be in a synagogue of love and sympathy, where people are not there in order to spy on me, or even to inform the authorities on what I've said in my latest

