

Public Investment and South Africa

Julian Bond

Thank you a great deal for the kind and warm welcome. I think most of us who work on African issues, who are scattered throughout the United States, begin to develop a feeling of isolation and estrangement. So it is extremely gratifying to discover that we are many and diverse, that those of us represented here in fact are representatives of a larger group of people scattered throughout the 50 states of the U.S. and that our cause is just and our success virtually assured.

Among all of us who are gathered here, there is a particular group: legislators and council members, who are here as part of the responsibility of our offices because we are all sworn to uphold the public good. There certainly could be no greater good than the cause for which we gather, the advancement of the struggle for the independence of Southern Africa.

We are here to complete the process of halting American complicity in the most hideous government on the face of the planet, the one system where racial superiority is constitutionally enshrined. We gather here at a time when even the most moderate advances away from complicity are being compromised, abandoned and withdrawn.

In less than six months, the new government of the U.S. reversed even the halting Africa policies of the Carter administration and has embarked on a course of arrogant intervention into African affairs in the most hostile way. From Cape Town to Cairo, the American eagle has begun to bare his talons. Our secretary of state is a man who pounded his palms on the table like tom-toms when African affairs were discussed in the Nixon White House. Our new ambassador to the U.N. sees callers [a high-ranking South African military intelligence team that came March 15, 1981]. [First] she says she does not know [them] and then denies seeing them at all. When her visitors are discovered to have entered the U.S. illegally and their hospitality revealed to be a violation of policy, she dismisses all complaints as if the policy had been already revised.

Unfortunately, she was right. America's policies towards Africa have changed. They have changed from benign neglect to a kind of malignant aggression. In Mozambique, starvation is added to the American arsenal. On the high seas, the American oil companies, Mobil, Exxon, and Texaco have joined European interests in breaking the OPEC embargo to South Africa. On Capitol Hill there is the intensity of Soviet competition in Africa, not humanitarian concerns, which conditions American aid to the continent. Mineral rights are exchanged for human rights.

In South Africa itself there is no mistaking the increased militancy, each group adding momentum to the irresistible motion of liberation. But our concerns are here. Our cause is to take whatever action we can

At the first national Conference on Public Investment and South Africa in 1981, some 200 state and municipal legislators from across the United States attended workshops on drafting socially responsible legislation, among other topics. Held in New York City on June 12–13, the conference also drew trade unionists, investment experts, church leaders, academics, and grassroots organizers. The conference sponsors included ACOA, AFSC, the Connecticut Anti-Apartheid Committee, Clergy and Laity Concerned, the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, TransAfrica, the United Methodist Office for the U.N., and the Washington Office on Africa.

For the opening session at the United Nations, Ambassador B. Akporode Clark of Nigeria, then chair of the U.N. Special Committee Against Apartheid, welcomed the participants. The keynote address, excerpted here, was given by SNCC veteran and Georgia state senator Julian Bond.

to end American complicity with this international problem [apartheid]. Our contribution is to pull together those forces—legislators, investment experts, trade unionists, student activists, that growing constituency for freedom in South Africa—to facilitate the expansion of public prohibitions against the expenditure of public funds for inhuman purposes. In short, we intend to end American investment in evil. The evil, of course, is the system of apartheid in which four and a half million whites absolutely dominate 20 million nonwhites, denying them every vestige of humanity. As the second-largest foreign investor, the U.S. plays a key role in keeping apartheid afloat. The net effect of American investments, according to former senator Dick Clark of Iowa, has been to strengthen the economic and military self-sufficiency of South Africa's apartheid regime.

Our cause, then, is to end American complicity with this evil. But we must know the course of the rapidly shifting climate around us. The loudest voice on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee today belongs to Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina and apologist for South Africa's fascists. The new president of the U.S. had already announced even before his nomination and election his intentions to subsidize subversion in Angola; he has sent repeated assurances to South Africa's white population that the U.S. will tolerate their genocide. He has further delayed the liberation of Namibia, rewarding South Africa's intransigence. He has made the American colossus he professes to adore bow down before a small tribe of racist tyrants.

We are here, then, to force the disengagement of our commonly held wealth from this evil. I think we all realize that this will be a difficult and time-consuming process, for we are in effect opposing the whole of American history. The current condition of American black people, political and economic, is more than well known. We gather here to ask the U.S. to honor the principle that no person's worth is superior to another, to do in foreign affairs what is yet to be done at home.

If it is difficult, our task is not impossible. Events in South Africa daily demonstrate that we are a part of a quickening struggle whose outcome has never been in serious doubt. We can make a great contribution to that struggle if all who truly believe in freedom will join us. Ours, then, is a subtle request; to ask our neighbors, the people with whom we share the country, to refuse to finance the domination of one set of human beings by another.

Surely that is a reasonable appeal. South Africa today constitutes a direct personal threat to us all. Forty years ago, Adolf Hitler demonstrated that genocide is yet possible even in democracy, even among people who look alike. It is evil supreme and we cannot allow it to continue; to be neutral on this issue is to join the other side.



State legislator Julian Bond in 1981.
Photo courtesy of Richard Knight.