

**“Since we can’t now bet on a winner, we should be hedging our bets and buying time.”**

**President John F. Kennedy, domestic racial equality and apartheid South Africa in the early 1960s**

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**Abstract:** This article explores the calculated approach adopted by the John F. Kennedy Administration in formulating policy towards apartheid South Africa. I will demonstrate, that in a strategy which mirrored its approach towards the domestic racial question, the White House offered symbolic gestures to appease the newly independent African states but refused to engage in stronger actions that could lead to tangible change for fear of damaging ties with a vehemently anti-communist Cold War ally.

**Keywords:** United States Foreign Policy, South Africa, John F. Kennedy, Cold War, Racial equality.

## **Introduction**

On October 29, 1963, in a memorandum to National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, National Security Council (NSC) staffer William H. Brubeck observed that in terms of the increasingly volatile and polarized situation in South Africa, “Since we can’t now bet on a winner, we should be hedging our bets and buying time.” His comment, while made just months before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, was a particularly apt

description of the calculating real politik approach adopted by the White House to the issue United States policy towards the apartheid state.<sup>1</sup>

The cynical approach of the Kennedy administration towards the issue of domestic race relations has been well documented. While portraying himself as a “crusading liberal” on the question of civil rights, primarily to gain electoral advantage, his actions amounted to little more than “tokenistic measures”. In contrast, in the case of apartheid South Africa Kennedy is traditionally seen as adopting a tougher stance by adopting a posture of limited cooperation and the imposition of an arms embargo in August 1963. In this article, I will demonstrate, however, that in a strategy which mirrored its approach towards the domestic racial question the White House offered minor concessions to appease the newly independent African states but avoided any tangible actions that would cause a dangerous level of friction with a vehemently anti-communist Cold War ally.<sup>2</sup>

In the domestic arena, Kennedy adopted a calculated policy of symbolic gestures to appease the African-American community combined with a hesitant enforcement of federal laws on integration in higher education and when deemed expedient, as was the case with the Freedom Rides and the Birmingham riots, the use or the potential threat of the use of force to stop further violence. The White House, however, avoided taking more meaningful actions on the issue of racial change to avoid damaging close political ties with the influential white segregationist cabal within the Democratic Party.

In the case of South Africa, in a parallel strategy, Kennedy sought to avoid cooperation in areas too readily identified with apartheid, began hosting multi-racial receptions at the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL), Papers of John F. Kennedy (JFKP), Box 387A, National Security Files (NSF), South Africa 9/63-11/63, Memo for Bundy from Brubeck, October 29, 1963, South Africa 9/63-1163.

<sup>2</sup> Bryant, *The Bystander*, 42, 466-467 and 471; Levingstone, *Kennedy and King*, 14-17; Thomson, *U.S. Foreign Policy towards apartheid South Africa*, 31.

Embassy and reluctantly agreed to both a bilateral and UN arms embargo in order to avoid more extreme measures such as economic sanctions, which Kennedy vociferously opposed. The White House, however, continued to cooperate with Pretoria in the economic and military spheres, inserted clauses into the arms ban which allowed the continued sale of advanced weaponry to Pretoria and discreetly offered tentative support for the controversial concept of the proposed Bantustans.

### **Historiography**

While there exists a range of literature on the Kennedy era observing the approach adopted by his administration regarding the domestic civil rights struggle there is a lack of recent scholarship that broadens this focus to offer a comparative analysis with his administration's foreign policy towards South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

In the article "'Hedging Our Bets and Buying Time': John Kennedy and Racial Revolutions in the American South and Southern Africa", which published in 2000, Thomas Borstelmann observes that Kennedy's primary goal of victory in the Cold War, which required the support of black and white Americans domestically and African nationalists and white minority governments in southern Africa, was directly threatened by the escalation in racial tensions leading the the White House evading making a direct choice between the different sides and instead following a strategy of compromise and the diminution of conflict. The article, while rich and valuable, is framed to offer a wider analysis of policy towards the southern African region. Borstelmann also suggests that while Kennedy eventually moved towards a stronger stance against domestic racism in the case of southern Africa his initially tough stance gave way to a position of greater neutrality. In his subsequent book, *The Cold*

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<sup>3</sup> Bryant, *The Bystander*; Levingstone, *Kennedy and King*.

*War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*, Borstelmann more broadly examines the impact of the historic contest between white supremacy and racial equality on the presidential administrations from Harry S. Truman to Bill Clinton. He observes that during the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Washington was faced with the dilemma of how to support the cause of racial equality while not alienating traditional Cold War allies and white Southerners leading to the development a strategy of controlling the pace of racial reform, globally and domestically, thereby minimizing provocation to the forces of white supremacy while encouraging gradual change. While a seminal work which unites the twin efforts of the anticolonial and civil rights movements and their influence on policy makers in Washington the book does not focus exclusively on the Kennedy era or apartheid South Africa.<sup>4</sup>

Alex Thomson's *U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Apartheid South Africa*, provides a magisterial overview of the relationship between Washington and Pretoria during the apartheid era. Thomson's book highlights a clash between human rights and strategic or economic interests during the Kennedy era but his work does not focus specifically on the 1960s nor does it offer a comparative analysis with domestic racial policy. *Cold War and Black Liberation: The United States and White Rule in Africa, 1948-1968* by Thomas Noer was published in 1985. The book observes highlights the complex and emotive clash between the question of majority rule and immediate pragmatic interests shaping the response of the various presidential administrations from Harry S. Truman to Lyndon B. Johnson. Noer specifically explores the role of the domestic Civil Rights movements in in guiding foreign policy. It is does not, though, focus specifically on the Kennedy era or offer a direct comparison between White House policy towards domestic racial issues and the complex relationship with South Africa.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Borstelmann, "Hedging our Bets and Buying Time"; Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*.

<sup>5</sup> Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation*; Thomson, *U.S. Foreign Policy towards apartheid South Africa*.

Phil Muehlenbeck's more recent publication, *Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy's Courting of African Nationalist Leaders*, positions Cold War geopolitics at the periphery of Kennedy's approach to the African continent and argues that in fact it was his understanding of the forces of decolonization and Third World nationalism that formed the core of his policies. In the view of Muehlenbeck, the Kennedy administration sought to oppose continued European colonialism in Africa, accept African nonalignment in the Cold War, initiate economic programs to help Africa's development and through personal diplomacy build a working relationship between him and the leader's of Africa's independence movement. While an insightful work, *Betting on the Africans*, however, does not focus exclusively on the Kennedy's relations with apartheid South Africa nor examine the parallels between his domestic and global stances towards the practitioners of white supremacy.<sup>6</sup>

In *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order*, Ryan Irwin offers an intriguing examination of how the continued presense of apartheid in South Africa fundamentally undermined the intellectual narrative of Third world nationalism that racial equality, along with territorial independence and membership in the United Nations (UN), was necessary for the economic development of African states in the postcolonial era. The book further highlights how diplomats from the newly independent black ruled African nations sought lay claim to previously Western dominated institutions such as UN General Assembly to press for sanctions against South Africa and the response of the Afrikaner leadership to circumvent this threat by appealing directly to a transnational network of powerbrokers and wrapping apartheid policies in the language of modernization theory and territorial nationalism. While Irwin does discuss the impact of this struggle on Washington and the broader agenda of Western liberal internationalism the focus of his work is neither a study of the bilateral

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<sup>6</sup> Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy's Courting of African Nationalist Leaders*.

relationship between Washington and Pretoria in the 1960s nor a comparison of White House policy on racial matters whether domestically or overseas.<sup>7</sup>

In this article I seek to build on and to a extent challenge the views put forward in the existing historiography. In particular, I challenge the understanding that the minor acts taken by the Kennedy administration and the imposition of the arms embargo signified the adoption by the White House of a strong stance against Pretoria. I further observe that in the case of South Africa, it was Cold War real politik, not decolonization or racial equality, that dominated Kennedy's decision making. I also differ from the interpretation of Borstelmann that Kennedy followed a more nuanced trajectory of moving towards a firmer stand on civil rights domestically while moving from a tough stand to a more neutral stance in southern Africa.

Instead, I will demonstrate, through a summary of Kennedy's domestic actions followed by a deeper analysis of his approach towards the issue of apartheid, that the White House consistently deployed a calculated dual strategy in both the Southern states and South Africa of offering symbolic gestures to placate those calling for a rapid pace of racial change yet refusing to engage in stronger actions that could lead to tangible results. This strategy stemmed primarily out of the fear of damaging his pragmatic relationship, whether global or domestic, with the practitioners of segregationist policies.

## **Kennedy**

On November 8, 1960, John F. Kennedy defeated Vice-President Richard M. Nixon in a closely fought contest to become the youngest ever individual elected to serve in the Oval Office. Born in 1917 into a wealthy and well connected political family in Massachusetts, Kennedy was raised in an all white society with little contact with African-Americans as equals. After his service in World War Two, though, Kennedy spent seven years in Washington as a

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<sup>7</sup> Irwin, *Gordian Knot*.

Congressman and Senator for Massachusetts where he used the issue of civil rights to define himself politically and establish his liberal credentials. Indeed as noted by Nick Bryant, his “nimbleness” at using the issue of racial equality to meet the political needs at the time explained in part his dramatic political success.<sup>8</sup>

During his electoral campaign for the White House, Kennedy verbally committed himself to civil rights and the cause of racial equality. Indeed, following the arrest of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. on October 19, 1960 and subsequent sentencing to four months of hard labor, for attempting to integrate a department store lunch counter in Atlanta, Georgia, Kennedy and his brother Robert F. Kennedy both exerted pressure on Georgia Governor Ernest Vandiver and successfully secured King's release from prison. Kennedy's actions garnered widespread praise in the African-American community and greater support for his candidacy eventually garnering seventy percent of the black vote. Kennedy's public support of the civil rights movement also led to fourteen electors from Mississippi and Alabama and one elector from Oklahoma refusing to support him in the Electoral College and instead casting their votes for segregationist Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia.<sup>9</sup>

As observed by Stephen Levingstone, however, African-Americans had good reason to be wary of Kennedy and his promises of being a champion for racial equality. During his time in Congress he had also sought to build close ties with Southern Democrats, including Senators James Eastland (Mississippi) and Richard Russell (Georgia), who represented the crucial electoral constituency of Southern white segregationists. Kennedy opposed President Dwight

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<sup>8</sup> Bryant, *The Bystander*, 42.

<sup>9</sup> JFKL Website, JFK in History, Civil Rights Movement, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/civil-rights-movement>; Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 292-293; Dudley and Shiraev, *Counting Every Vote: The Most Contentious Elections in American History*, 83; Thomson, *U.S. Foreign Policy towards apartheid South Africa*, 32.

D. Eisenhower's civil rights legislation in 1957 and two years later consulted with Alabama Governor John Patterson over lunch at his Georgetown home before launching his presidential campaign. Patterson then subsequently endorsed Kennedy describing him as a "friend of the South."<sup>10</sup>

Foreign policy also played an integral role in Kennedy's stance on racial equality whether in the Mississippi delta or the veld of southern Africa. For the Kennedy administration the defining struggle of the 1960s was the Cold War contest for global supremacy not the cause of civil rights. Indeed it is clear that geopolitical thinking was a major determinant guiding the positions that the White House took when considering the question of racial equality. Kennedy was well aware that segregation in the former Confederacy and U.S. ties with South Africa provided Moscow with an useful propaganda tool to embarrass Washington on the global stage. Domestically, however, the administration needed the support of the Southern Caucus to advance its political objectives and globally South Africa, with its powerful military and vast mineral resources, appeared to be a more practical ally than the weak and divided black liberation movements of southern Africa.<sup>11</sup>

### **Domestic Civil Rights**

In confronting the question of white supremacy either domestically or on the southern tip of Africa Kennedy's approach was marked by a calculating political expediency. The early 1960s, witnessed a growing confrontation between an increasingly assertive African-American

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<sup>10</sup> Levingstone, *Kennedy and King*, 1, 14-15; Thomson, *U.S. Foreign Policy towards apartheid South Africa*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 8/62-10/62, Problems of Southern Africa, October 4, 1962; JFKL Website, JFK in History, Civil Rights Movement,

<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/civil-rights-movement>; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 471-472;

Levingstone, *Kennedy and King*, 14-15.



community seeking to gain full political and social rights as citizens and the white population determined to cling on their socioeconomic and political privileges in the Deep South. The White House, while well aware of the need to maintain the liberal credentials of Kennedy in the eyes of the African-American community, was also reluctant to endanger the support of the Southern Democratic senators and governors who fought for continued segregation with, in the words of Levingstone, the “fervor of Confederate soldiers”. Indeed, Kennedy had never sought to radically alter race relations in the South and certainly was not prepared to do so in the face of determined opposition from within his own political party.<sup>12</sup>

Upon entering the Oval Office, Kennedy offered minor concessions to appease liberals and African-Americans including strengthening the Civil Rights Commission, speaking out in favor of school desegregation and appointing larger numbers of African-Americans within the U.S. Government notably the May 1961 appointment of Thurgood Marshall to the bench of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. Kennedy, however, postponed any action on civil rights legislation and his implementation of the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs Board of Education* that state laws establishing racial segregation in public schools were unconstitutional, was painstakingly slow in the Deep South. As late as 1963 not a single school district in Alabama, Mississippi or South Carolina had been entirely desegregated and by the time of Kennedy’s assassination only one in a hundred black children attended an integrated school across the South.<sup>13</sup>

Even when compelled to take action, the White House remained only a reluctant participant in the cause of racial equality. In May 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality

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<sup>12</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 366, White House Central Files, HU (2)/ST 24 1/20/61-10/15/62, Telegram to Kennedy from Senator Strom Thurmond, September 30, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, WHCF, HU (2)/ST 24 (Mississippi): General, Letter to Kennedy from Congress Joe. D. Waggoner, October 2, 1962; Levingstone, *Kennedy and King*, 14-15 and 17.

<sup>13</sup> Brauer, "John F. Kennedy", in Graff (ed.), *The Presidents*, 487 and 490; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 463.

(CORE) organized integrated Freedom Rides as an act of defiance against segregation in interstate transportation. The Freedom Riders were arrested and met with violence across the South but it was only after a horrific mob attack on a bus and its occupants in Alabama that Attorney General Robert Kennedy sent four hundred U.S. marshals to protect the Freedom Riders.<sup>14</sup>

On May 20, President Kennedy spoke of his “deepest concern” regarding the situation but refused to criticize Alabama officials for failing to protect the Freedom Riders and urged both locals and riders to refrain from actions which would provoke further violence. Indeed, Kennedy privately expressed annoyance at the problems that CORE had caused for the administration in Alabama. As observed by Bryant, the Kennedy administration’s “diffident” response to the Freedom Rides merely stimulated further intransigence on the part of Southern officials.<sup>15</sup>

In 1962, violence erupted at the University of Mississippi, known as “Ole Miss”, when James H. Meredith Jr. an African-American Air Force veteran attempted to enroll as a student. Since 1961 Meredith had been repeatedly denied admission to the university due to Mississippi’s policy of segregation. Despite a U.S. Supreme Court ruling on September 10, 1962, that Meredith had the right to be admitted to the university, Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett defiantly stated that “No school will be integrated in Mississippi while I am your Governor.” The White House, well aware of the deep seated opposition among Southern Democrats to the use of the military to enforce federal laws in the South reached a compromise agreement with Governor Barnett. Barnett had been found in civil contempt by the Court of

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<sup>14</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 366, WHCF, HU (2)/ST 1 1961, Telegram for Kennedy from Connor, May 20, 1961; JFKL, JFKP, Box 358, WHCF, HU 11/16/61-12/31/61, Summary of Civil Rights Progress.

<sup>15</sup> Bryant, *The Bystander*, 282; Levingstone, *Kennedy and King*, 169-170.

Appeals and under the threat of arrest agreed to allow Meredith to register as a student and to maintain civil order.<sup>16</sup>

On September 29, Meredith accompanied by U.S. Marshals, but not federal troops, successfully registered at "Ole Miss". The situation swiftly turned violent when several thousand protesters against integration began rioting on the campus which was exacerbated by the withdrawal of the Mississippi Highway Patrol. Governor Barnett also further encouraged the rioters by stating in a late night radio address that "We will never surrender" to the federal government. It was only after the extent of the violence became clear that Kennedy reluctantly issued Executive Order 11053 which authorized Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara to take all appropriate steps to enforce all orders of the United States District Court for the Southern District of Mississippi and remove all obstructions of justice.<sup>17</sup>

In May 1963, civil rights campaigners including Dr. King launched a campaign of mass protests against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. In a heavy handed response Birmingham City Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor arrested nearly one thousand protesters and used high pressure fire hoses and police dogs to suppress the demonstrations. In spite of the events being widely reported, including as fruitful propaganda for Moscow, in Washington the Kennedy administration refused to act. As noted by Bryant, the White House

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<sup>16</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 366, WHCF, HU (2) /ST 24 1/20/61-10/15/62, Telegram to Kennedy from Thurmond, September 30, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, WHCF, HU (2)/ST 24 (Mississippi): General, Letter to Kennedy from Waggoner, October 2, 1962; Levingstone, *Kennedy and King*, 265.

<sup>17</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 366, WHCF, HU (2)/ST 24 1/20/61-10/15/62, White House Proclamation, September 29, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 366, WHCF, HU (2)/ST 24 1/20/61-10/15/62, Executive Order 11053, September 30, 1962; Levingstone, *Kennedy and King* 268; Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 295.

had become accustomed to and comparatively untroubled by white segregationist violence againsts civil rights protesters.<sup>18</sup>

On the night of May 11, however, the situation changed, at least in the view of the Kennedy administration, when many African-American protesters, increasingly disillusioned with the non-violent approach advocated by King, began to attack police and white residents of the city. Kennedy swiftly invoked federal authority to dispatch several thousand troops to Fort McClellan air base and despite a fragile calm descending on the city on May 13 he warned Alabama Governor George C. Wallace that if the violence continued military personnel would be deployed in Birmingham itself. Kennedy's belatedly forceful action was clearly stimulated less by the cause of desegregation than a signalling that he would accept no more violence from the black protesters. Indeed, as Kennedy himself stated, regarding the situation in Birmingham, "the people who've gotten out of hand are not the white people, but the Negroes".<sup>19</sup>

One month later, the segregationist policies in Alabama were again causing problems for the White House. At his inauguration in January 1963, Governor Wallace had vowed to defend "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever." On June 11, in a stage managed response to the prospective enrollment of three African-American students at the University of Alabama, Wallace, accompanied by Alabama State police troopers upheld his

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<sup>18</sup> JFKL, JFKP, White House Staff Files (WHSF), Box 19, Lee White Civil Rights Files, Alabama 5/2/63-10/9/63, Telegram to Wallace from Kennedy, May 13, 1963; JFKL, G. Mennen Williams Oral History Interview, January 27, 1970; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 393; Morris, "Birmingham Confrontation and the Power of Social Protest" 621–636.

<sup>19</sup> JFKL, Taped Meetings, 86 - Cuba/Civil Rights" May 12, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, White House Staff Files (WHSF), Box 19, Lee White Civil Rights Files, Alabama 5/2/63-10/9/63, Telegram to Wallace from Kennedy, May 13, 1963; Levingstone, *Kennedy and King*, 385; McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 438.

promise to "stand in the schoolhouse door" to prevent two black students from enrolling at the University of Alabama.<sup>20</sup>

In Washington, the Kennedy administration, fearing the optics of media reports depicting a white governor blocking the registration of black students had sought to discourage Wallace taking this stance but again it was reluctant to use federal military power to enforce the court ordered enrollment of the students. Instead Kennedy issued a presidential proclamation demanding that Wallace end the standoff and Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach flanked by U.S. Marshals ordered Wallace to step aside. It was only after Wallace's refusal to accept the proclamation, with journalists looking on, and subsequent widely reported speech on states' rights that Kennedy federalized the Alabama National Guard under Executive Order 11111 forcing the removal of Wallace and ensuring the registration of the students.<sup>21</sup>

Overall, an examination of Kennedy's approach to the issues of domestic civil rights reveals a calculated plan. A course of action that primarily ignored the core issues of segregation and white political control to avoid unnecessarily antagonizing the powerful Southern faction within the Democratic Party and only reluctant enforcement of federal laws when political circumstances dictated a need for White House involvement.

Kennedy arguably hedged his bets through a strategy of minor tokenistic acts to burnish his liberal credentials while avoiding actions that would lead to meaningful change to appease and maintain the support of the racist and segregationist politicians whose favor he

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<sup>20</sup> JFKL, Personal Papers, Box 18, Assistant AG Files, FBI Reports University of Alabama, December 12, 1962-May 31, 1963, Memo from Robert F. Kennedy, May 1963; Levingstone, *Kennedy and King*, 342.

<sup>21</sup> JFKL Website, Executive Order 11111, June 11, 1963, <https://civilrights.jfklibrary.org/media-assets/the-university-of-alabama.html#The-Showdown--Executive-Order-11111>; JFKL, JFKP, Box 366, WHCF, HU (2)/ST 1, Telegram to Wallace from Kennedy, June 15, 1963; Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 139-141 and 146.

needed both for reelection and for his legislative agenda. The cynical approach adopted by the Kennedy administration towards the issue of domestic racial equality was mirrored by a equally hard headed realist outlook on the question of policy towards South Africa.

### **Background: Apartheid South Africa**

On May 26, 1948, the National Party (HNP) led by Daniel F. Malan had ousted long term South African leader Jan Christian Smuts in an election that heralded the onset of the institutionalized system of racial discrimination known as apartheid in Afrikaans. The Nationalists, once in power, moved swiftly to enact their political agenda. The Population Registration and Group Areas Acts of July 1950 forced all South African residents to be classified into racial groupings and empowered the Governor-General to declare geographical areas, including urban residential and business neighbourhoods, to be for the exclusive occupation of specific racial groups.<sup>22</sup>

By the early 1960s, the National Party was firmly entrenched in power. As noted by the CIA, virtually all the white population supported minority rule and the limited white opposition was politically weak and ideologically divided. The South African economy was

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<sup>22</sup> Harry S. Truman Library (HSTL), Papers of Harry S. Truman (PHST), Box 177, President's Secretary's Files (PSF), CIA Review, NSC Meetings June 17, 1948, CIA Review; HSTL, PHST, Box 170, PSF, National Security Policies, Vol. I Geographical Areas, NSC Report on the Current Policies of the United States of America Relating to the National Security; Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1948, Vol. V, Part 1, The Near East, South Asia and Africa, Policy Statement of the Department of State, November 1, 1948; Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory, O'Malley Archive, Population Registration Act No 30, Apartheid Legislation 1948-1990,

<https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv01538/04lv01828/05lv01829/06lv01838.htm>

Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Department of Historical Papers, Box A1485, Union of South Africa Act, No.41 1950; Michel, "My children, you are permitted in time of great danger to walk with the Devil until you have crossed the bridge", 8-9.

booming including a high level of foreign investment especially from the United Kingdom. The international condemnation and boycotts had also led to an increasing degree of self-sufficiency. While the anger and frustration of the non-white groups, towards white political and economic supremacy, was exacerbated by their increasingly restrictive and repressive treatment under the Nationalist government the “effective military establishment and a highly efficient police security system” had prevented any attempt at an organized insurgency.<sup>23</sup>

The growing domestic strength of the National Party led the South African Government to pursue its policy of grand apartheid including the establishment of so called Bantustans for the black African population. The Bantustan concept, as envisaged by Pretoria, involved the creation of a series of scattered black African tribally based states in a confederal or commonwealth system on approximately 13% of the total land area of South Africa.<sup>24</sup>

The first Bantustan, the Transkei, was granted self-government in 1963 and while its constitution accorded the Transkei most of the paraphernalia of a modern constitutional state Pretoria retained control over many key areas including foreign affairs, military and policing. While the idea of independent black states within South Africa faced opposition from some right wing Afrikaners, Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd argued such division had to take

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<sup>23</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 8/61, Guidelines for U.S. policy towards the Republic of South Africa, July 19, 1961; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, CIA Special Report, May 10, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159A, NSF, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963.

<sup>24</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 10/61-10/62, Secret Attachment to George C. McGhee et al., July 6, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159A, NSF, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963.

place in order to “buy the white man his freedom and the right to retain domination in what is his country.”<sup>25</sup>

Pretoria also possessed administrative control over South West Africa which it administered as a de facto fifth province including the expansion of apartheid into the territory. The large primarily arid former German colony with a population of under six hundred thousand (approximately half a million blacks and seventy thousand whites) had been granted to South Africa in 1920 under a League of Nations mandate in the aftermath of World War One.<sup>26</sup>

Following the dissolution of the League of Nations and creation of the United Nations (UN) South Africa had refused submit the territory to a UN trusteeship or abide by a subsequent International Court of Justice advisory opinion that it should submit reports to the UN. On November 4, 1960, Ethiopia and Liberia instituted proceedings before the ICJ alleging South Africa non-compliance with its international legal obligations under the Mandate Agreement, the Covenant of the League of Nations and the UN Charter, notably introducing apartheid and refusing to recognize UN supervisory authority. In 1962, however, despite the growing international pressure, Pretoria established the ‘Commission of Enquiry into South West Africa

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<sup>25</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 10/61-10/62, Secret Attachment to George C. McGhee et al., July 6, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159A, NSF, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963.

<sup>26</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 8/62-10/62, Problems of Southern Africa, October 4, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159A, NSF, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963; Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (LBJL), Lyndon Baines Johnson Papers (LBJP), Box 8, NSF, 60/70 Africa, CIA National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) June 2, 1966.



Affairs', also known as the Odendaal Commission after its head Frans Hendrik Odendaal to consider future development of the territory.<sup>27</sup>

### **Competing Pressures both Global and Domestic**

White House policy towards South Africa during the Kennedy era was shaped by a pragmatic interpretation of a number of global and domestic determinants. On the international stage, Pretoria's de facto annexation of South West Africa as well as its policy of apartheid itself were coming under increasingly strident condemnation from the ranks of newly independent black African states and also at the UN. Indeed, at the UN the question of the mandate over South West Africa had been on the agenda every year since the inception of the organization and the issue of apartheid had been consistently raised for over a decade.<sup>28</sup>

The increasing power and influence of the newly independent black African nations within the UN General Assembly also had to be considered when weighing policy towards South Africa. Indeed, the number of postcolonial Afro-Asian member states meant that it become impossible for the United States and its Western allies to muster enough votes to form the two thirds majority needed for resolutions without African or Asian assistance. The White

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<sup>27</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, MemCon, August 31, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 8/62-10/62, Memo for Rusk from Cleveland and Mennen Williams, October 3, 1962; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa Telegram from Embassy South Africa to Department of State, March 1, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387A, NSF, South Africa 9/63-11/63, MemCon August 26, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159A, NSF, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963; LBJL, Central Files (CF), Box 76, NSF, Africa, General, Vol. 1 2/64-6/64, Briefing for NSC Standing Group, March 10, 1964; LBJL, LBJP, Box 8, NSF, 60/70 Africa, CIA NIE, June 2, 1966.

<sup>28</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 10/61-10/62, Secret Attachment to George C. McGhee et al., July 6, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159A, NSF, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963; LBJL, LBJP, Box 73, NSF, South Africa, CIA NIE, May 20, 1964.

House was also well aware that the extent of U.S. strategic and economic influence in black Africa, as well as in terms of gaining support diplomatic objectives at the UN, was intrinsically linked to the stance or perceived stance that Washington took on the vexed question of apartheid South Africa.<sup>29</sup>

The White House was also concerned by the growth of communist interest in and effect on African affairs. The early Sixties witnessed a dramatic increase in communist economic and military aid to the newly independent black nations as well as funds, covert arms shipments and guerrilla training to the black liberation movements. The Soviets and Communist Chinese were unburdened by a colonial legacy and unlike Washington were not encumbered by close geopolitical or economic ties to Pretoria. Indeed, apartheid and continued South African control over South West Africa provided a particularly potent opportunity for communist meddling and allowed Moscow and Peking, in the words of NSC staffer Brubeck, a fertile opportunity “to fish in troubled African waters.”<sup>30</sup>

Domestically, the increasing African-American interest in ending minority rule in South Africa and opposition to any actions which appeared to link Washington with the apartheid state proved problematic for the White House. Indeed, in late November 1962, the American Negro Leadership Conference adopted a series of resolutions expressing strong disappointment over the economic ties and other support that South Africa continued to receive

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<sup>29</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 10/61-10/62, Secret Attachment to George C. McGhee et al., July 6, 1962; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa Telegram from Rusk to Department of State, October 6, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa 3/63-8/63, Memo for Kennedy from Ball, July 13, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159, NSF, Africa-General, 8/13/63-9/11/63, Telegram to Rusk from Stevenson, August 21, 1963.

<sup>30</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 10/61-10/62, Secret Attachment to George C. McGhee et al., July 6, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 2 NSF, Africa General 8/62-10/62, Problems of Southern Africa, October 4, 1962; LBJL, CF, Box 76, NSF, Africa General, Vol. 1, CIA Memo, January 22, 1964; LBJL, CF, Box 76, NSF, Africa General, Vol. 1, CIA Special Report, June 19, 1964.

from the United States. The Kennedy administration was particularly concerned by any African-American efforts to draw a false parallelism between apartheid and domestic racial policies. In June 1963, when Dr. King was scheduled to appear before the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid, Secretary of State Dean Rusk expressed “serious reservations” in view of the danger that the racial problems in the South could be made the focus of UN attention.<sup>31</sup>

Geopolitically, however, the key strategic location of South Africa, its powerful military and the vehement anti-communist stance adopted by the National Party leadership heavily influenced Kennedy administration policy towards Pretoria. Its position on the tip of southern Africa allowed the South African military to monitor Soviet activities in the south Atlantic as well as providing important facilities for U.S. aircraft and naval vessels on the Cape sea route. South Africa was also a “uniquely necessary location for tracking of Soviet missiles and satellites” and hosted a Department of Defense (DOD) communications facility which served as the terminus of the Atlantic Missile Range. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) also maintained a deep space tracking station at Krugersdorp, near Johannesburg.<sup>32</sup>

The White House was also cognizant of the fact that Pretoria maintained both a potent military force and a willingness to support Western actions against the global communist threat.

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<sup>31</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 235, WHCF, Memo for Kennedy, December 17, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159, NSF, South Africa-General, 6/3/63-7/12/63, Memo for Kennedy from Rusk, June 21, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387A, NSF, South African Uranium, Memo to Kennedy from G. Mennen Williams, June 24, 1963.

<sup>32</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 8/61, Guidelines for U.S. policy towards the Republic of South Africa, July 19, 1961; JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 5/62, Department of State Guidelines for Policy and Operations Republic of South Africa, May 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159A, NSF, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963.

As observed by the State Department, South Africa's modern airforce, expanding army and small but efficient navy meant that the Republic possessed "armed might superior to any existing military grouping of nations on African continent". The oft repeated claims of Pretoria to be a staunch Western ally were bolstered by its record of supporting U.S. military actions in the post-World War II era including South African Air Force participation in the Berlin Airlift and the Korean War. In contrast, the black liberation movements were perceived to be weak, divided and to a large degree infiltrated by communists or communist sympathizers.<sup>33</sup>

The South African economy also provided lucrative opportunities for trade and investment. By 1960, the U.S. exports to South Africa totalled over \$277 million and imports from South Africa were approximately \$108 million. In terms of direct assets, U.S. corporate and private investment in South Africa rose from around \$320 million in 1960 to over \$600 million in 1963 primarily due to the high rate of return. By the end of the Kennedy era over 150 U.S. firms invested in the apartheid state including Caltex, Firestone, Ford and General Motors.<sup>34</sup>

The Kennedy administration was also well aware of the importance of South Africa's vast mineral resources for the United States on both economic and strategic grounds. By the

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<sup>33</sup> HSTL, Dean Acheson Papers, Box 68, MemCon File, April 1951, MemCon, April 20, 1951; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, CIA Special Report, May 10, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 10/61-10/62, Secret Attachment to George C. McGhee et al., July 6, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, Appendix A as attachment to memo for Robert S. McNamara from Maxwell D. Taylor, July 10, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159A, NSF, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963; South Africa: A Country Study, 338; Thomson, *U.S. Foreign Policy towards apartheid South Africa*, 18-19.

<sup>34</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 8/61, Guidelines for U.S. policy towards the Republic of South Africa, July 19, 1961; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159A, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963.

early 1960s, Pretoria controlled over 50% of global gold production (2/3 of the free world gold output), marketed 80% of the world's diamonds and possessed 45 commercially significant minerals including strategic grades of asbestos and crocidolite asbestos as well as uranium which was a key component in atomic and nuclear weapons. Indeed, when considering the effect of economic sanctions on the respective South African and U.S. economies the Departments' of Commerce and State agreed that in "in a test of wills, South Africa can therefore withhold from us more things of value that we need than we can withhold things of value that it needs."<sup>35</sup>

Domestically, South Africa, on both racial and strategic grounds, enjoyed considerable support among the public and on Capitol Hill especially among conservatives. Indeed, many members of the powerful cabal of Southern Democrats in Congress drew a direct correlation between the struggle to maintain segregation in the South and support for other global white supremacist regimes. The Kennedy administration, given the importance of such political figures both for its legislative agenda and electoral considerations, was therefore mindful of the need, as with domestic civil rights, to avoid extreme actions that would weaken his alliance with this tight knit group of segregationists.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 8/61, Guidelines for U.S. policy towards the Republic of South Africa, July 19, 1961; JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 5/62, Department of State Guidelines for Policy and Operations Republic of South Africa, May 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159A, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963.

<sup>36</sup> LJBL, LBJP, Box 77, NSF, Africa General, Vol. 5, To President Johnson from Senator Moss et al., August 24, 1967; LJBL, LBJP, Box 72, South Africa, 4/26/66, A Special Study of South Africa: The Strategic View, by General S. L. A. Marshall, as attachment to Letter from American-African Affairs Association Co-Chairman William A. Rusher, November 30, 1967; Horne, *From the Barrel of a Gun*, 15 and 84; Michel, *The White House and White Africa*, 19; Michel, "Those Bothersome Rho-dents: Lyndon B. Johnson and the Rhodesian Information Office", 7; Rolfe, "The Citizens' Council and Africa" 631 and 634-636.

Within the administration itself, Kennedy did appoint a number of prominent supporters of black African liberation including United Nations Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs G. Mennen Williams. In February 1961, during a visit to Nairobi, Kenya, Williams was widely and erroneously reported as having stated that “Africa was for the Africans” causing outrage in Rhodesia and South Africa. When six months later, in August 1961, during a visit to Lusaka, Zambia, Mennen Williams was punched in the face by an angry white Rhodesian, the blow caused a good deal of amusement for members of the white minority governments in southern Africa.<sup>37</sup>

The influence of these Africanists, however, was limited by the more conservative outlook of Secretary of State Rusk and Under Secretary of State George Ball who opposed taking a strong stance against Pretoria as endangering U.S. geopolitical interests and only serving to harden white South African attitudes potentially leading to broader racial conflict in the region to the detriment of Western interest and benefiting only the communists. Such views were further echoed by the U.S. Ambassador to South Africa Joseph Satterthwaite.<sup>38</sup>

Overall, Kennedy’s approach towards the issue of apartheid in South Africa bears an uncanny similarity to his tactics in dealing with domestic civil rights. The White House made a series of symbolic gestures designed to demonstrate his opposition to white minority rule and attempt to appease the increasing demands of the Afro-Asian bloc to take action against Pretoria. Kennedy, however, was unwilling to take measures that would put at risk U.S. geopolitical or economic interests especially given the vehement opposition to such actions by influential figures within his own party.

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<sup>37</sup> Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, 75; Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans*, 42, 45.

<sup>38</sup> JFKL, George W. Ball Papers (GWBP), Box 7, South Africa, 7/27/61-10/31/63, TelCon Kaysen-Ball, March 18, 1963; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa From Rusk to Harriman, June 15, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, Memorandum for Kennedy from Ball, July 13, 1963; Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans*, 182.

## **National Security Action Memorandum 33**

In March 1961, just two months after Kennedy took office, Secretary of State Rusk ordered National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 33 which called for a review in policy towards Pretoria in light of Prime Minister Verwoerd's decision to withdraw South Africa from the British Commonwealth. Kennedy administration officials, including National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, expressed a need to formulate a clear policy regarding U.S. relations with the increasingly isolated and ostracized Nationalist Party government in Pretoria. It was deemed expedient, however, by the State Department for Kennedy to send a congratulatory message to South African State President Charles Robert Swart on the occasion of the inauguration of the Republic emphasizing the desire of the United States to retain close ties with South Africa as it embarked on a "new phase in its eventful history".<sup>39</sup>

In response to NSAM 33, the State Department proposed a two pronged policy of cooperation with South Africa where possible and in the U.S. interest but the avoidance of collaboration in areas too overtly associated with apartheid. This new approach caused consternation in Pretoria, indeed, on September 5, after being handed an aide memoire by Ambassador Satterthwaite regarding the future U.S. approach towards cooperation with South Africa, Foreign Minister Eric Louw stated that "It would appear from this that the US wanted to have its cake and eat it too." In reality, however, except for several minor actions, the Kennedy administration did little to damage ties with South Africa.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 329, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, NSAM 33, Memo for Rusk from Bundy, March 22, 1961; JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 3/21/61-5/30/61, Memo for Bundy from Battle, May 25, 1961; JFKL, JFKP, Box 124, President's Office Files, South Africa 1961, Telegram from Department of State to Embassy Cape Town, May 29, 1961.

<sup>40</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 329, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, NSAM 33, Memo for Bundy from McGhee, May 25, 1961; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Telegram from State Department to Embassy South Africa, August

## **Symbolic Opposition: Meetings with Albert Luthuli and Multiracial Embassy Receptions**

The White House did open, despite the displeasure of Pretoria, tentative links to the African National Congress (ANC). Following the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to ANC President Albert Luthuli in the fall of 1961, Kennedy sent a congratulatory telegram complimenting him for this “high recognition of your past and continuing efforts in the cause of justice and the advancement through peaceful means of the brotherhood of man”. It should be noted, however, that Kennedy initially refused to send a message and was only convinced to do so following a letter from Assistant Secretary of State for Africa G. Mennen Williams who pointed out that Luthuli could have an important role in a future South Africa.<sup>41</sup>

Eighteen months later, Ambassador Satterthwaite met with Luthuli in Groutville, near Durban. During a lengthy discussion Luthuli expressed to Satterthwaite his opposition to the Bantustan concept as creating “rural slums” and economically unfeasible. When asked whether he was still opposed to violence Luthuli evaded the question and instead observed that government policy gave black South Africans no other line of action. Indeed, CIA reports indicate that from as early as 1961 Luthuli had been convinced by communist sympathizers within the ANC to support a campaign of sabotage in an effort to destabilize the country. Pretoria had been informed of the meeting in advance and again expressed irritation at the U.S. action.<sup>42</sup>

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25, 1961; JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, General 9/1/61-9/10/61, Telegram for Rusk from Embassy Pretoria, September 6, 1961.

<sup>41</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 11/61, Letter for Kennedy from Williams, November 3, 1961; Memo from Battle to Bundy, November 13, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Memo from Battle to Bundy, November 13, 1961; JFKL, JFKP, Box 124, President’s Office Files, South Africa 1961, Telegram to Luthuli from Kennedy, November 15, 1961.

<sup>42</sup> JFKL, JFKP, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, From Embassy Cape Town to Rusk, May 7, 1963.



The State Department, against the advice of Satterthwaite, also instructed the embassy and consulates to begin hosting multiracial receptions on days of national importance for United States. The South African Government expressed annoyance at the decision and Verwoerd himself issued veiled threats to Satterthwaite regarding possible retaliation against U.S. interests as result of this action. The first multiracial reception were held to celebrate on July 4, 1963 to celebrate Independence Day. The following day Satterthwaite reported that the receptions had been held as planned at all diplomatic posts with “no unpleasant incidents, good attendance and highly favorable reactions in various quarters”. South African officials, however, declined their invitations to the celebrations and in Port Elizabeth a number of leading U.S. executives also refused to attend the multi-racial reception out of a concern that their participation would harm their business relationship with the National Party leadership.<sup>43</sup>

### **A Geopolitical Balancing Act: Atomic Energy, Missile Tracking and Arms Sales**

On May 24, 1962, however, Kennedy approved an amendment to the civil atomic energy agreement with South Africa initially signed under President Dwight Eisenhower in 1954. The amendment included provisions for the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) to lease or sell to Pretoria a continued supply of 20% enriched uranium for use as in civil research and power reactors. Article 2 of the amendment also permitted the exchange of further “special nuclear material” on an as may be agreed basis between the two parties.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Telegram from Embassy South Africa to Department of State, June 10, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box159A, NSF, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963; Thomson, *U.S. Foreign Policy towards apartheid South Africa*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 11, White House Central Files (WHCF), International Agreements (3-1) 2, Amendment to Agreement for Cooperation between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Republic of South Africa concerning Civil Uses of Atomic Energy, May 7, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 11, WHCF,

The issue of conducting business as usual in the field on atomic energy with the practitioners of apartheid appears not to have been a concern for the Kennedy administration or even been flagged as a point of contention. In fact Kennedy also approved the amendment despite an awareness that Pretoria consistently refused the entreaties of State Department to turn to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for technical assistance with or monitoring of its atomic program. The amendment did, however, did allow Washington and Pretoria to enter into potential arrangements for IAEA safeguards without further modification of the agreement itself.<sup>45</sup>

In the military arena, as noted earlier, the White House was also cognizant of the important location of South Africa for both missile and satellite tracking. In August 1960, during the Eisenhower Presidency, Pretoria had permitted Washington to establish a temporary missile and satellite tracking station in South Africa. The agreement, though, was due to expire on December 31, 1961 and the Kennedy administration, despite the misgivings of several high ranking officials including USUN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson and Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles, authorized Ambassador Satterthwaite to enter negotiations with Pretoria for a open ended extension for the military tracking station and continued usage of South African airfields and ports in connection with long range missile testing.<sup>46</sup>

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International Agreements (3-1) 2, Letter to Kennedy from Seaborg, May 14, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 11, WHCF, International Agreements (3-1) 2, Letter to Seaborg from Kennedy, May 24, 1962.

<sup>45</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 11, WHCF, International Agreements (3-1) 2, Letter to Kennedy from Seaborg, May 14, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 11, WHCF, International Agreements (3-1) 2, Memo for Kennedy from Bell, May 19, 1962.

<sup>46</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Memo for the Record, February 27, 1961; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Letter from Stevenson to Rusk, June 2, 1961; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Letter from Bowles to Bundy, September 21, 1961; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Telegram from the Department of State to Embassy South Africa, October 24, 1961.

The decision of the White House, at the urging of the Department of Defense, was entirely based on strategic rationale. South Africa was considered a uniquely necessary location for tracking both Soviet and U.S. missiles and satellites and Defense advised the Kennedy administration that there was no effective alternative for the development of a number of key objectives including the Midas and Ranger satellite programs. The vehement anti-communism of the National Party government also added to the attractiveness of South Africa as a permanent base for the tracking station and indeed Pretoria had not only voluntarily extended the previous agreement but also continued cooperated fully in allowing use of their facilities while awaiting further proposals from Washington.<sup>47</sup>

On June 15, 1962, as part of the negotiations over the renewal of the tracking station agreement, Washington exchanged an aide-memoire with Pretoria in which the United States agreed to cooperate with South Africa to defend against the global communist threat and sell Pretoria military equipment needed for this purpose. The note was exchanged simultaneously with a South African aide-memoire reiterating its commitment to the military tracking station. While no direct quid pro quo was given it is quite clear that the tracking station arrangement was accompanied by an “understanding” that Washington would “give prompt and sympathetic consideration” to reasonable requests for the purchase of military equipment required for the defense of South Africa.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Memo for the Record, February 27, 1961; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Letter from Gilpatric to Bowles, March 16, 1961; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Letter from Gilpatric to Bowles, May 17, 1961; JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 5/62, Department of State Guidelines for Policy and Operations Republic of South Africa, May 1962.

<sup>48</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 3/62-4/62, From Embassy Cape Town to State Department, March 9, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 5/62, Department of State Guidelines for Policy and Operations Republic of South Africa, May 1962; JFKL, GWBP, Box 7, South Africa, 7/27/61-10/31/63, TelCon

Fourteen months later, however, on August 2, 1963, USUN Ambassador Stevenson informed the UN Security Council that the United States was implementing an arms embargo on Pretoria beginning on January 1, 1963, due to the “evil business” of its apartheid policies. He highlighted, though, that existing contracts would be honored and Washington reserved the right to interpret the policy in the light of the maintenance of international peace and security. The Kennedy administration, subsequently voted for UNSC Resolution 181, on August 7, which called on all member states to cease selling military hardware to South Africa.<sup>49</sup>

The White House decision to impose the arms embargo stemmed from the increasing geopolitical pressure from African nations and at the UN. Following the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) on 23 May 1963, the organization called for a global boycott of trade with South Africa and set up a Liberation Committee based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, to assist the movements of southern Africa fighting white minority rule. The OAU also called for member states to pressure the so called Great Powers to take stronger measures, including sanctions, against Pretoria. As noted by Mennen Williams, even “responsible African leaders who are our friends” were now demanding meaningful action that went beyond a mere condemnation of the system of apartheid.<sup>50</sup>

In Washington, the Kennedy administration was aware of the need to placate the increasingly vociferous demands of the independent African states in order to prevent the

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Chayes-Ball, July 12, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, Memo for Kennedy from Ball, July 13, 1963.

<sup>49</sup> JFKL, Papers of Harlan Cleveland (HCP), Box 98, South Africa and Apartheid, 7/63-8/63, Statement by Stevenson to the UNSC, August 2, 1963; JFKL, HCP, Box 99, South Africa and Apartheid, 10/63-3/64, UNSC Resolution, August 7, 1963; JFKL, HCP, Box 99, South Africa and Apartheid, 10/63-3/64, Statement by Ambassador Yost, in UNSC, August 7, 1963.

<sup>50</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, To Rusk from G. Mennen Williams, June 13, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, Memo for Kennedy from Ball, July 13, 1963.

potential loss of U.S. military facilities in the “African bloc”, notably a communications station at Kagnew, Ethiopia and Wheelus Air Base in Libya, as well as importance of avoiding any opportunities for the Soviet Union to gain a foothold in Africa. The White House, however, also wished to avoid prejudicing its strategic and economic ties with Pretoria by supporting extreme actions such as mandatory trade sanctions. The imposition of the arms embargo, despite the opposition of Ambassador Satterthwaite, therefore, was a calculated move by the Kennedy administration to appease the African states yet avoid a serious rupture in relations with the Afrikaner leadership in South Africa.<sup>51</sup>

The White House had already made it clear to Pretoria as early as 1961 that it would only provide military hardware for its external defense and the insertion of the “strategic exemption” into the embargo simply codified this decision and provided a diplomatic cover regarding continued arms sales to South Africa. The symbolic nature of the arms ban was also not lost on the press in South Africa. The *Johannesburg Star* stated that the embargo was more “dramatic than effective” and observed the “obscurity” in U.S. policy while *Die Vaderland* noted that Washington was fully aware of the strategic value of South Africa and had made explicit assurances to ensure its security.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, From McNamara to Rusk, July 11, 1963; JFKL, GWBP, Box 7, South Africa 7/27/61-10/31/63, TelCon Chayes-Ball, July 12, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, Memo for Kennedy from Ball, July 13, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159, NSF, Africa-General, 9/18/63-9/29/63, Telegram to Rusk from Satterthwaite, September 18, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387A, NSF, South Africa, 9/63-11/63, CIA Intelligence Memo, October 23, 1963.

<sup>52</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Telegram from State Department to Embassy South Africa, August 25, 1961; JFKL, HCP, Box 98, South Africa and Apartheid, 7/63-8/63, From Embassy Pretoria to Rusk, August 6, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, NSF, Box 159, Africa-General, 9/12/63-9/17/63, Memo for Kennedy from Rusk and McNamara, September 16, 1963.

Indeed, in an example of calculated real politik, while the Washington was preparing to publicly announce the arms embargo Kennedy was kept abreast of commercial arms deals with Pretoria worth nearly \$3 million including torpedoes and Sidewinder air-to-air missiles that would not be available for delivery until 1964 or 1965. At the recommendation of Secretary of State Rusk, Kennedy also approved the sale of spare parts for C-130 transport aircraft previously sold to Pretoria in 1961 despite their greater applicability for suppressing internal disorder.<sup>53</sup>

In March, 1963, five months prior to the announcement of the arms embargo, the South African Naval Chief of Staff had asked the U.S. Naval Attache in Pretoria if Washington would be willing to entertain a request to permit the purchase of three Barbel class conventional attack submarines. The Kennedy administration, while well aware of the potential criticism from the black African states, replied favorably to opening future negotiations over the sale due to a desire to maintain good relations with Pretoria and the improvement that the potential \$120 million sale would give the U.S. balance of payments. Administration officials were also dismissive of the “very small political cost”. Indeed, Under Secretary of State George W. Ball observed that “even the Africans can see that submarines are not going to be used against them.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Telegram from the Department of State to Embassy South Africa, September 29, 1961; JFKL, HCP, Box 98, South Africa and Apartheid, 7/63-8/63, Memo for Kennedy from Rusk, July 31, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159, Africa-General, 8/13/63-9/11/63, Memo for Kennedy, August 20, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159, NSF, Africa-General, 9/18/63-9/29/63, Memo for Rusk and McNamara from Bundy, September 23, 1963.

<sup>54</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Memo from Rusk to Kennedy, March 16, 1963; JFKL, GWBP, Box 7, South Africa, 7/27/61-10/31/63, TelCon Kaysen-Ball, March 18, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159, NSF, Africa-General, 8/13/63-9/11/63, Memo for Kennedy, August 20, 1963.

On August 9, one week after the public announcement of the arms embargo, the South African Ambassador Willem Naude inquired as to whether submarines constituted part of the strategic exemption for items permitted to maintain international peace and security and would the United States be willing to continue the negotiations. In late September, Kennedy aware that both the Departments' of Defense and State favored the sale and despite the dismay of Ambassador Stevenson who argued that such a decision would put into question the "sincerity of our public utterances and our opposition to apartheid", approved dispatching a team of U.S. officials to South Africa for exploratory technical talks.<sup>55</sup>

### **Growing Commercial Ties**

In terms of broader economic ties, following the Sharpeville Massacre of March 1960, there had been a exodus of foreign capital and by June 1961 nearly ZAR 250 million had been moved out of South Africa. American businessmen and corporations, however, aware of the high rates of return in South Africa capitalized on the opening and U.S. investment nearly doubled between from 1960 and 1963 to a total of over \$600 million. This influx of U.S. capital not only provided the investors themselves with a strong profit margin but also assisted in the stabilization of the South African economy. Indeed, Charles W. Engelhard, a major donor to

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<sup>55</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 159, NSF, Africa-General, 8/13/63-9/11/63, Memo for Kennedy, August 20, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, Memo to Bundy from Samuel E. Belk, August 30, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159, NSF, Africa-General, 9/12/63-9/17/63, Telegram from Stevenson to Rusk, September 13, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159, NSF, Africa-General, 9/12/63-9/17/63, Memo for Kennedy from Rusk and McNamara, September 16, 1963; JFKP, Box 159, NSF, Africa-General, 9/18/63-9/29/63, Memo for Rusk and McNamara from Bundy, September 23, 1963.

the Democratic Party helped to arrange a private loan of \$150 million directly to the National Party government itself.<sup>56</sup>

The Kennedy administration demonstrated no interest in stopping the flow of investment to South Africa and was also firmly opposed to the imposition of sanctions against Pretoria. The White House was well aware that despite the immediate flight of foreign capital after Sharpeville, the ensuing comparative stability combined with the high profits margins available, meant that South Africa remained a highly competitive market and that U.S. commercial ties could easily be absorbed by competing nations. In terms of sanctions, the State Department was well aware that such action would have little effect on South Africa but could have damaging impact on the U.S. economy especially if Pretoria halted or manipulated gold sales to Washington or other Western allies.<sup>57</sup>

On a personal level, Kennedy was adamantly opposed to any restriction of trade with South Africa. In 1963, the Newmont Mining Corporation requested, on behalf of the Palabora Mining Company, an \$9.8 loan from the Export Import Bank (Ex-Im Bank), the official export credit agency of the U.S. Government, to finance the purchase of movable mining equipment from U.S. suppliers to further develop a copper deposit at Phalaborwa. The last successful application for direct Ex-Im Bank credit financing had been in 1959 and approval of the loan would be, as observed by Mennen Williams, a dangerous course of action that would provide

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<sup>56</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 387A, NSF, South Africa 9/63-11/63, Memo for Kennedy from Ball; JFKL, HCP, Box 99, South Africa and Apartheid, 10/63-3/64, Background Paper: U.S. Investment in South Africa, October 30, 1963, Thomson, *U.S. Foreign Policy towards apartheid South Africa*, 41-42.

<sup>57</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 2 NSF, Africa General 8/61, Guidelines for U.S. policy towards the Republic of South Africa, July 19, 1961; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, Status of United States-South African Economic Matters; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159, NSF, Africa-General, 8/7/63-8/12/63, Memo for Rusk from Hughes, August 12, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387A, South Africa 9/63-11/63, Memo from Bundy to Brubeck, September 12, 1963.



the communists with the opportunity to highlight the close association between Washington and Pretoria as well as angering the domestic African-American community. Kennedy, however, was adamant that the economic benefit of continued trade ties trumped these concerns and the loan should be approved.<sup>58</sup>

### **Potential Acquiescence in the Establishment of the Bantustans**

The White House also displayed a calculated approach to the issues of the establishment of the Bantustans and Pretoria's continued de facto control over South West Africa. In terms of the Bantustans, despite the claims of South African Ambassador Naude that the new black majority territories would be "fully independent" nation states within the confines of the broader Republic of South Africa, both the Department of State and Ambassador Satterthwaite expressed doubts over the extent of Pretoria's "good faith" in its commitment to full autonomy for the Bantustans. Indeed, as observed by Irwin, the independence of the Transkei was as much about propaganda as genuine political reform.<sup>59</sup>

The Kennedy administration was also well aware that the Bantustan concept was vehemently criticized by both black South Africans and the newly independent black African

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<sup>58</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 387A, NSF, South African Uranium, The Palabora Mine: South Africa; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387A, NSF, South African Uranium, Memo to Kennedy from Williams, June 24, 1963; JFKL, GWBP, Box 7, South Africa, 7/27/61-10/31/63, TelCon Williams-Ball, October 22, 1963; "American Involvement in the South African Economy", 14.

<sup>59</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 159, Africa-General, 7/13/63-7/31/63, MemCon July 20, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 387A, NSF, South Africa, 9/63-11/63, MemCon August 26, 1963; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Telegram from the Department of State to Embassy South Africa, August 28, 1963; JFKL, HCP, Box 99, South Africa and Apartheid, 10/63-3/64, Telegram for Rusk from Embassy Pretoria, November 26, 1963; JFKP, Box 159A, NSF, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963. Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, 67.

states. Washington, therefore, cognizant of both the limited nature of the 'independence' offered by Pretoria and the opposition of black ruled Africa offered no public recognition or support for the establishment of the self-governing Transkei or future Bantustans within South Africa.<sup>60</sup>

In private discussions with South African diplomats, however, figures within the Kennedy administration acknowledged that while Washington could not approve of the Bantustan concept it could in the words of Mennen Williams, "acquiesce", in such a situation if there was a more equitable distribution of land and wealth and so long as it was accepted by both black and white South Africans. In a meeting with Naude on July 20, 1963, Rusk even went so far as to propose the creation of a confederation of white and black states across southern Africa incorporating the British High Commission Territories and South West Africa. The Secretary of State further emphasized that the "whites and blacks living in each other's areas would be resident aliens without rights of participation as citizens." A clearly delighted Naude responded that Rusk had almost expressed "word for word" the intentions of Pretoria.<sup>61</sup>

### **South West Africa**

In the case of South West Africa, the Kennedy administration wished to avoid an escalation of the situation especially at the UN. The White House was concerned that such a development could lead greater pressure on Washington from the black African states and provide further opportunities for Soviet exploitation. Kennedy, though, was unwilling to risk

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<sup>60</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, From Embassy Cape Town to Rusk, May 7, 1963; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Telegram from Embassy South Africa to Department of State, May 14, 1963.

<sup>61</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 387, NSF, South Africa, 3/63-8/63, MemCon, June 3, 1963; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159, Africa-General, 7/13/63-7/31/63, MemCon July 20, 1963.

damaging economic or strategic ties with Pretoria by pressing too hard on the issue or supporting what he viewed as radical actions at the UN.<sup>62</sup>

The White House therefore, privately sought to encourage Pretoria to abide by its obligations under League of Nations mandate, move towards a greater degree of accountability to the UN and halt further expansion of apartheid into the territory. The United States also voted in favor of UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolutions 1593, 1596 and 1805 which to varying degrees criticized South Africa for its continued occupation and supported the UN in its efforts to establish a presence in South West Africa. Washington, however, opposed stronger measures including UNGA Resolution 1899 which deemed the issue “a serious threat to international peace and security” and called for an oil embargo on South Africa.<sup>63</sup>

## **Conclusion**

On November 22, 1963, Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas and his Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as the new occupant of the Oval Office. Interestingly, the assassination of Kennedy and the elevation of Johnson to the Presidency was met with concern by segregationists, both domestic and global, but also among the ranks of the independent black African states. Johnson’s commitment on racial equality and commitment

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<sup>62</sup> JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 8/62-10/62, Problems of Southern Africa, October 4, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 159A, NSF, South Africa-General, Department of State National Strategy Series-South Africa, October 28, 1963.

<sup>63</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Memo from Wight to Williams, June 6, 1961; JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 6/62-7/62, From Embassy Cape Town to State Department, June 20, 1962; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, MemCon, August 31, 1962; JFKL, JFKP, Box 2, NSF, Africa General 8/62-10/62, Memo for Rusk from Cleveland and Mennen Williams, October 3, 1962; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, Telegram from Embassy South Africa to Department of State, March 1, 1963; FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, From Department of State to U.S. Mission to the UN, September 27, 1963.

to the passage of a civil rights bill was troubling for both white Southerners and white South Africans while African-Americans fretted over his background in rural Texas and African nations were uncertain on his stance towards black liberation. These concerns about Johnson, though, also demonstrate the deftness of Kennedy at both running with the hare yet also baying with the hounds by appeasing the domestic civil rights movement and the newly independent black African states yet avoiding too much friction in his relationship with either Southern Democrats or the Nationalist Party leadership in Pretoria.<sup>64</sup>

When confronting racial discrimination and white supremacy whether in the Deep South or South Africa the Kennedy administration clearly adopted a cynical approach based on the real politik of the era. The White House adopted a strategy of making minor gestures, such as the appointment of Thurgood Marshall to the U.S. Court of Appeals or the the hosting of multiracial receptions at the U.S. Embassy in Pretoria, as demonstrative of emblematic opposition to both domestic segregation or apartheid. On occasion, when circumstances dictated a need for stronger actions then a reluctant Kennedy, in the name of political expediency and to avoid more extreme measures, took limited steps such as dispatching federal marshals to belatedly protect the Freedom Riders or the imposition of the arms embargo on South Africa.

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<sup>64</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XXI, Africa, From Brubeck to Bundy, November 26, 1963; JFKL, Foreign Press Box 39, South Africa, The Pretoria News, November 26, 1963; JFKL, Foreign Press Box 39, South Africa, The Johannesburg Star, November 27, 1963; JFKL, Foreign Press Box 39, South Africa, Rand Daily Mail, November 28, 1963; Hayden Library, Arizona State University, Senator Barry M. Goldwater Papers, W Series, Box 3, Republican National Committee, Research Division, Some Indications of Public Opinion at the Close of 1963, January 1964; Caro, *Means of Ascent*, xvii – xviii; Caro, *The Path to Power*, 364; McPherson, *A Political Education*, 143-145.

The White House, however, also sought to tread a path that avoided unnecessary confrontation with either the influential Southern cabal within the Democratic Party or a geopolitical ally and trading partner in South Africa over the comparatively minor issue, in his view, of racial equality. Guided by a calculating and pragmatic rationale, Kennedy therefore rejected the adoption of actions that could be detrimental domestically to either his broader legislative agenda as well as his reelection campaign or would damage political and economic ties with a strategically important and vehemently anti-communist nation in the broader struggle of the Cold War. Kennedy himself saw no inconsistency in such an approach. Indeed, as noted by Levingstone, when confronted by criticism that he was not liberal enough on racial issues Kennedy responded that “I am not liberal at all. I am a realist.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Levingstone, *Kennedy and King*, 17.

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