Over the last two years, the United States, Great Britain, Germany, France and Canada have become deeply involved in trying to negotiate with South Africa for U.N.-supervised elections in Namibia to bring into being an authentically free Namibia. The stakes for the U.S. are high, since the west hoped that a negotiated settlement in Namibia would preserve western interests and would provide a precedent for a peaceful resolution of the political conflict in South Africa itself. But the South African government has continued to thwart the west's plans.

All during this time, South Africa has pursued a dual strategy:

1) negotiating with the west so it couldn't be called totally intransigent, while trying to ensure that SWAPO would reject the proposed settlement and be blamed for the breakdown; and

2) at the same time, going ahead with plans for establishing its own "internal settlement" in the territory.

In May, 1978, the South African government agreed to the western plan for U.N.-sponsored elections for a constitutional assembly, the withdrawal of South African forces and administration, the release of all Namibian political prisoners, and the abolition of apartheid and repressive legislation and practices. But it is clear in retrospect that South Africa's acceptance of the plan was not genuine, for on May 4th it savagely bombed a large refugee camp at Cassinge, Angola, killing more than 600 Namibians. South Africa undoubtedly assumed that SWAPO would then reject the western-initiated plan. But SWAPO agreed to go along with the plan, and in July the United Nations Secretary General's Special Representative led a team to Namibia to investigate the best way to implement the proposals. Then, on September 20th, Prime Minister Vorster coupled a rejection of the United Nations plan with an announcement of his resignation.

At this point South Africa came forward openly with its second strategy. It announced that it would proceed to implement its own election plan which it had been preparing for more than two years in order to elect its favored "internal leaders". Western foreign ministers who had met with the new Prime Minister in October were skillfully manipulated by South Africa. They went to South Africa to try to convince Botha to call off the elections. But instead Botha got the west to agree to elections which they had wanted stopped. He also forced the west, and probably also the United Nations, into having to deal with what South Africa now calls the "duly-elected leaders of South West Africa", thus enhancing their political standing.

Victory by the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) in the early December election was a foregone conclusion, because of massive amounts of money
A campaign and because of extensive government intimidation. The DTA won 41 of the 50 seats in the "constituent assembly". Justin Ellis, an Anglican layman deported from Namibia on November 28th, reported that the government threatened Africans with the loss of pensions, jobs or the right to hospital treatment if they did not vote. Five leaders of SWAPO inside the country were detained the day before the election began. South African army personnel accompanied mobile polling places which could enter private property any time of the day or night. A cable from the U.S. Embassy in Pretoria reported that "special forces" of the South African Defense Force were brought into Ovambo specifically for purposes of "security" during the election.

On December 22nd the South African Foreign Minister informed U.N. Secretary General Waldheim that the DTA-controlled constituent assembly supported "an internationally acceptable solution." Botha's letter to Waldheim laid out five specific conditions which would change the plan already adopted by the Security Council:

1) no reduction of South African troops before all violence ends;
2) a fixed election date before September 30th;
3) further negotiations between the U.N. and South African Administrator General Steyn on the composition of the U.N. peacekeeping force;
4) monitoring of SWAPO bases in neighboring states; and
5) the South African police will stay in place during the transition.

A second letter added that the United Nations must give up all direct and indirect support to SWAPO.

What this proposal amounts to is U.N.-supervised elections under South African military and administrative control.

The Current U.S. Position on Namibia

South Africa's internal initiative put United States policy-makers in a difficult and embarrassing position. To quote from a prediction of the October 20th Financial Mail:

"The West would be / brought face to face with the contradiction in its own policy: its sentimental, racial, and highly profitable links with a country whose policies it finds it politic to condemn in various world forums... With this knowledge, South Africa would have successfully gambled on the fact that the West's bark was worse than its bite, that Vance and Co. are really little more than paper tigers, that when the chips are down they will wield their votes against sanctions resolutions put forward at the UN."

The Carter Administration is currently expressing optimism that the western-initiated proposal will be implemented, following South Africa's December 22nd communication to Waldheim. However it is far from sure that such optimism is warranted, as even Ambassador Donald McHenry admits. The question now is whether the proposal will be watered down by further concessions to make real control of the election process by the UN impossible.

If the plan for U.N.-supervised and controlled elections falls through, the Financial Mail's prediction may well come true. All during the negotiations process, western representatives hinted to South Africa that, if
they failed to co-operate, it would be very difficult for western countries to veto African-sponsored sanctions resolutions in the Security Council. But after South Africa's flat rejection of the western plan and its defiant holding of its own elections in December, the United States still showed no stomach for imposing meaningful economic sanctions against the Botha regime. The West has succeeded in getting African countries to postpone hard-hitting sanctions proposals over and over again, but if South Africa is intransigent this won't be able to go on forever.

Several Washington Post and New York Times stories have reported that an options paper on various forms of sanctions against South Africa and their possible consequences has been circulating within the Administration for months. U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young has specifically mentioned that a three-month withdrawal of landing rights to South African commercial aircraft is one of the options being considered.

Not wanting to make enemies of African states appears to be the main reason why the Carter Administration would go along with some form of sanctions. On the other side, the Administration is plainly worried that conservatives in Congress who worked hard for white privilege in Rhodesia will turn their attention as well to Namibia, if the U.S. votes for sanctions against South Africa at the United Nations.

A possible showdown on Namibia would force the United States to deal with continued dominance of South Africa in the whole region. For this reason it is important that we be prepared to give attention to policy on Namibia if there is a confrontation in late January or early February.

Possible lobbying strategies

1. The principal arena for United States action on Namibia continues to be the United Nations Security Council. Waldheim's Special Representative, Marti Ahtisaari, will go to Namibia on January 8th, probably for ten days to two weeks. The U.N. Security Council is not likely to meet on Namibia until his return. If the diplomatic exploration goes satisfactorily, it will be important to urge that the original form of the plan adopted by the Security Council be retained. If the plan is scuttled by South African action, it is possible that the Security Council will enact some, probably limited, form of sanctions against South Africa. In that event, non-governmental groups could send individual or joint letters to President Carter urging him to support African resolutions against South Africa until it withdraws completely from Namibia. We could also urge and help prepare a similar response from sympathetic members of Congress.

2. If the Security Council does adopt a strong sanctions resolution, right-wing members of Congress might formulate legislation to prohibit U.S. participation in such sanctions, as they did with the Byrd Amendment in regard to Rhodesian sanctions.

3. Legislation taking unilateral economic action against South African occupation of Namibia is another possibility. Bills could be introduced banning importation of Namibian goods into the U.S., or eliminating tax credits for U.S. firms which pay taxes to the South African government for their operations in Namibia.