

SOUTHERN AFRICA

GROUP FOR EDUCATION (SAGE)

Introduction

The observations and ideas in this paper are based on a trip I made to Africa from June to August, 1980. The trip included attending the Freetown OAU Summit Conference as an observer, a short visit to Zimbabwe and four weeks of extensive travel in South Africa. My focus was on southern Africa in general and current developments in South Africa in particular. I had opportunities to meet with students of all races, black and white political personalities, religious leaders, businessmen and diplomats. A recurrent theme in almost all discussions was the perception of Americans as having a low level of knowledge and interest in southern Africa. American students were seen as isolated from reality, uninformed or simply an unknown quantity. Some people described this condition with resignation and others with frustration. Most often expressed was disappointment that Americans seemed unable to develop and sustain meaningful approaches to the difficult decisions and present realities that the peoples of southern Africa face.

My own experience during the trip convinced me that I, at least, knew far too little about the backgrounds of the people I met, the conditions in which they work and live, and their views of the future. The purpose of SAGE is to increase the amount and quality of information available to students, and to provide them and southern Africans more opportunities for the kind of direct contact that is necessary to formulate intelligent opinions and positions.

South Africa and the U.S.

Recent events have shown clearly that political and economic change in southern Africa is no longer something to be wished for or feared in the distant future. Major changes have taken place or are underway in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa itself. What kind of future these changes will lead to is still unknown, and in some cases, particularly South Africa, it is difficult to be certain of even the nature and direction of the process. Ideological and political perspectives color perception; for some, a violent struggle is already a fact and all other efforts to influence events are considered irrelevant; others still hope to achieve their aims by negotiation and relatively peaceful accommodation; many people, non-political and non-ideological, are confused and uncertain both about what is happening and about what they should do.

Within this context of change the southern African situation embodies many of the most explosive issues of our time: human rights, racial inequality, self-determination of peoples, protection of minority rights, land reform and distribution of wealth, access to vital natural resources. For Americans these are not abstractions that can be shrugged off as the problems of distant peoples. They affect the U.S. economy and domestic politics, the increasingly important North-South dialogue, the East-West competition for advantage and influence, and the stability and goodwill of a number of independent African states with which we have or need to have good relations.

In addition to these rather secular issues there are moral and ideological questions which pose a formidable challenge to historical American values and aspirations. Many of us have not been very successful in meeting this challenge and in fact have chosen to duck the issue entirely. Some say that we have little power to influence events in southern Africa and that we must cut our moral cloth accordingly. Others find comfort in believing that an occasional well-aimed moral brickbat absolves them from further responsibility.

None of these responses have given much aid or comfort to their intended beneficiaries in southern Africa. A better-informed and more comprehensive response is expected by southern Africans and is needed if we are to maintain the considerable reservoir of admiration and respect for Americans and the U.S. that still exists in much of the region.

American Student Involvement

The varying level of American student involvement in major issues of the day is to some extent a factor of the "temper of the times", to some extent a response to relatively clearcut moral or intellectual challenges, and to some extent unfathomable. When student interest does respond to a moral or intellectual issue, its intensity and effectiveness seem to vary with the immediate relevance of the issue to the students' lives and/or with the availability of means for expressing a position with impact. The Vietnam war and the issue of nuclear power plants were perceived as personally relevant to many students, and a practical and impactful response was available:

draft resistance and boycott of construction sites. The civil rights movement of the 60's was somewhat less immediately relevant to the lives of the students (then mostly white), but it did offer a dramatic opportunity for expression: participation in (mostly black) freedom marches.

This brief analysis of student response may help explain the prominence of the disinvestment issue on campuses that are responsive to southern African matters. Students react strongly and personally to a broad range of southern African issues, but they have lacked effective means of expression except to protest against business and university investment in South African industry.

The specific question of the desirability or efficacy of U.S. disinvestment is not within the scope of this paper. However, the preeminence of this issue on campuses, almost to the exclusion of all other southern African issues, relates directly to the observations made earlier. In South Africa there are many people, both blacks and whites, on either side of the disinvestment issue, but there is virtually no one, white Afrikaner Nationalist or black Soweto revolutionary who will take seriously an American student whose knowledge and interest in the issues begin and end with strong opinions on disinvestment. Protest gestures on American campuses may or may not be appreciated in southern Africa, but what is really wanted are students' minds --minds that can grasp and express several dimensions of issues that range across a spectrum of political and economic concerns. This reflects both the blacks' and the Afrikaners' respect for education. Blacks, who as a group have been denied education, know that this has been a serious impediment to effective ethnic mobilization. Afrikaners, who have been the beneficiaries of what may be the most single-minded affirmative action program (self-administered) ever directed at an impoverished and scorned minority, know precisely the value of their educational system. Just as both groups look at their own students for the knowledge and tenacity to advance their respective causes, so do they look at American students as potentially crucial in influencing American public opinion and policy.

More Effective American Student Involvement

A key premise of this paper is that American students interested in southern Africa should take seriously the criticisms and expectations directed at us by the people with whom we are concerned. The criticisms are that we are superficially and inadequately informed and that our efforts, however well-meant, are dissipated by confusing our own needs with those of the southern Africans. The hope and the expectation are that we will take the time and make an effort to understand what is going on and then act in accordance with our own principles and enlightened self-interest. There is a general confidence that informed American students will help, not hinder, a process of positive change. American students are not expected to risk their lives or to champion or revile any particular leader or movement in southern Africa. Rather they are expected and invited to educate themselves so that they can participate effectively in whatever group they find themselves to help bring about rapid and constructive change. It is suggested that this is the way to establish the "availability of means for expressing a position with impact".

SAGE

To put into practice the ideas and purposes summarized above, the Southern African Group for Education (SAGE) has been organized at Brown University. Membership is open to all students at the University. An Executive Council, nominated by the organizing members for the first year and elected by the full membership annually thereafter, will formulate a program and establish policies and procedures for its implementation subject to the organization's bylaws. Members of the faculty and others, not associated with the University, have been invited to serve as advisors and Resource Persons.

The program of SAGE will basically consist of two areas of activity, with each area having two parts:

1. Communications

- A. Persons with expertise in southern African affairs, will be invited to address SAGE and to participate in seminars, debates, and other activities that may be organized. Expertise and interest will be the criteria for the selection of guests--not their political affiliation or any judgement as to the ideological or moral acceptability of their views. Former Ambassador Andrew Young has accepted our invitation to be the first speaker.
- B. A collection of books, periodicals, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets and films is being assembled for the use of members and others interested in southern African affairs. A newsletter describing SAGE's current activities will be produced at timely intervals.

2. Projects

- A. The Executive Council, in conjunction with SAGE's advisors and Resource Persons, and in accordance with the interests of the members, is developing a variety of projects for members that will include:
 - attendance at international conferences that have relevance to southern African affairs
 - participation in activities organized by governments, foundations, companies and individuals
 - summer and in-term internships in Africa
 - preparation of papers for publication in student and academic periodicals
 - exchange programs with southern African universities on both a student and faculty level
 - research projects sponsored by SAGE
- B. To the extent that resources and opportunities permit, SAGE will

endeavor to make a similar program (as outlined in A.) available to students in southern African universities.

A number of the activities listed above are being organized to qualify for academic credit under the university's Group Independent Study Program. SAGE will also advise and assist members who wish to undertake individual projects that qualify for credit under the Independent Studies Program.

Funding and assistance for SAGE will be sought from foundations, corporations, and individuals. All cash contributions will be made to the University for subsequent disbursement to SAGE. The sources of all funds will be a matter of public record. All funds received will be used for the purposes outlined in this project paper and in a manner consistent with the bylaws.