

UNITED STATES POLICY IN AFRICA: AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANK G. WISNER

Frank G. Wisner is currently Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs in the U.S. Department of State. In this capacity he recently has been engaged in the so-called "contact group" negotiations with the parties to the dispute in southern Africa. He is a career foreign service officer whose most recent prior postings have been Director and Deputy Executive Secretary of the Office of Southern African Affairs (1976-1979), and Ambassador to Zambia (1977-1982). In this interview, Ambassador Wisner outlines the major interests and policy objectives of the United States on the continent of Africa, focusing especially on the issues of southern Africa. He describes the U.S. policy of constructive engagement with respect to South Africa and its participation in negotiations aimed at reducing tensions in the region, expressing the view that only through such direct contacts can the U.S. hope to reduce the violence and oppression prevalent in the region and thereby create conditions which can expedite its social and economic development.

FORUM: In general terms, what are U.S. interests in Africa and who defines them?

WISNER: Africa is an extremely large continent with many countries; to encapsulate American interests there in a neat package is almost impossible. I would begin in a very unfair and general manner by saying that the United States is a global power with interests in every corner of the world. Those interests compel the United States as a broad matter of policy to have good, strong, cooperative relationships with the sovereign governments of Africa, as in other continents. In our interdependent world this involves a wide variety of political and economic issues that need to be discussed and negotiated.

Second, we have long, historic ties to the continent. Americans have traveled to and lived in the continent now for the best part of the century and in some places longer than that, so there is an old association that creates relationships, interests, and bonds of a personal and institutional nature. It is also true that a significant percentage of this country's population hails from Africa's shores, and in light of the fact that we are an immigrant country — a country of people who found new lives on these shores — that human dimension is part of the broad range of American interests in the continent.

Third, we have a very deep interest in peace and the stability of the world order. The United States does best in this world when there is peace and stability and therefore we have a very keen interest in Africa's peace as part of our global objective. We have a very keen interest in making certain that Africa is not in flames, for those flames once starting in one person's house, burn in others. We have a very keen interest in making sure that Africa does not become a battleground between East and West. We want to use the influence of the United States to help resolve issues of a regional nature before they become issues of global contention, particularly contention between ourselves and the Soviet Union.

Fourth, the United States has an economic interest in Africa. Africa is an extremely good customer for American goods and services and has been so for a number of years. Africa is a growing continent that will be in the market for American products and American services and technology, and we have an interest in promoting those sales under stable and reasonable conditions. We therefore have an interest in Africa's development not only for the benefit to Africa's peoples and the political and economic stability it brings, but also for the market creations that exist as a result. We are a key consumer of African products such as minerals, cash crop products, and some limited finished products. Nigeria is one of our principle oil suppliers, as is Angola. We import base metal minerals from Zaire, from the Zambians, and from the southern Africans. We import strategic minerals such as cobalt, which are very important to a number of end users in the United States and in which stable, reliable, and productive African outlets are very important.

Finally, there is the sense of political cooperation in the world, which is best expressed through international institutions. Africa has one of the larger, if not the largest, single block of votes in the United Nations system, and that system is vital to the United States. We have a keen interest in the way Africa sees those international organizations, and therefore have an interest in working with Africa and conveying our views to African nations as they play their roles out inside the international system.

In short, we are interested in all of these considerations, and we are interested in the world around Africa. Africa sits astride key sea lanes which are strategically and economically important. So a mix of all these different kinds of interests begins to define why the United States has a deep and committed interest in the continent and is going to exercise that responsibility in a most serious manner. Our welfare and our livelihood are tied up in Africa's welfare and livelihood.

FORUM: What influence has the black community in this country had

on the formulation of policy toward Africa? Has the community been active lobbying and applying other kinds of pressure?

WISNER: The community of black Americans expresses views in a variety of different ways: through elected representatives on Capitol Hill, through citizens' organizations of great variety and number, and in those direct contacts that exist between federal government representatives like myself and the audiences we speak and meet with. I would welcome more contact of that nature. I think much more is needed. There is a need in this country for a much stronger dialogue between government and black Americans on African issues. There is a need for more serious attention to Africa's problems beyond even the black American community; knowledgeable, in-depth understanding of what the real conditions are on the continent. In my judgement, Africa is getting a pretty short shrift from the media and academic institutions in this country, each of which ought to be giving it more time.

FORUM: To focus now on the most contentious area of the continent, southern Africa, and particularly on the situation of South Africa, what have been the achievements of the U.S. policy of constructive engagement?

WISNER: One of the points you made in your previous question was the role and influence of black Americans and I would think one of the real reasons that the United States must be involved in southern Africa and in South Africa in particular is that we are a multi-racial society. This society functions badly when there is racial animosity and tension. We cannot survive as a polity, in any rational sense, if there is racial discrimination practiced beyond our borders, for that racial discrimination will have a direct and immediate impact on American politics and the way we look at each other. As a society, we must be committed to the elimination of racial discrimination, racial injustice, as a broad matter in the world; otherwise, the health of this republic is at stake. When you come to the case of South Africa, of course, you come immediately to the issue of apartheid. It is an issue that shocks and deeply worries all Americans, and I say that without exception.

The administrations that I have served with have been uniform in their view and belief that the system of apartheid as practiced inside South Africa is a system that runs totally contrary to basic American values. This administration is no different. I think President Reagan stated recently once again his personal view of apartheid as a repugnant institution. As the President went on to say, the policy choice that we face is this: we can, by condemning and reproaching the problem, conclude

that we have done our job and walk away from it; or alternatively, we can condemn and feel very strongly about apartheid but then carry forward the U.S. responsibility to play a constructive role in changing the reality of apartheid and in influencing a move away from the system of apartheid towards a society in South Africa that would be ruled by the consent of all of South Africa's peoples. Constructive engagement takes the second of these two choices and says that in expressing our deep repugnance with the system of apartheid, we have to be involved in trying to change that system and change it *peacefully*. I emphasize peacefully because this country can never be in the position of promoting violence and instability.

Constructive engagement, in effect, has two thrusts which should be repeated, because it has been frequently misunderstood. On one hand, constructive engagement says that the point of our policy is to be engaged with all parties in southern Africa. The United States is seeking to be an intermediary — a mediator, if you will — responding to the interests of all the parties in southern Africa, without preference to one or another and to the exclusion of none. I have heard many say that constructive engagement is solely designed as a way of building a relationship with the Republic of South Africa; this is just absolutely false. The second basic feature of constructive engagement is to create a policy context within which the United States can use its influence to bring about the very kind of peaceful change we believe is necessary inside South Africa. And let me underscore once again, and very clearly, that the United States is in favor of change. The United States backs change inside South Africa and not government policy.

That said, we look at this in a very hard headed manner knowing that what we want to accomplish, in full consistency with traditional American values, requires that we get a handle, an American handle, on the process of change. Frankly, to engage in minor economic pinpricks, such as cutting off American purchases of Krugerrands, as a number of people have suggested, amounts simply to rhetorical condemnation, and is not effective policy. Rather, what we have sought to do is to enter into dialogue, to conduct quiet diplomacy with those who are in a position of responsibility inside South Africa so that we can help talk, pose choices, pose options, and encourage those who hold power to make the kinds of changes we believe are important. Second, we have sought to create a context in which the United States can act directly inside South Africa. I'm happy to say we have succeeded — will be spending well above ten to fifteen million dollars this year in providing tools to black, colored and Indian South Africans; tools with which they can increase their leverage inside the South African system. These include: educational

opportunities, such as scholarships here and in South Africa; training possibilities in leadership of trade unions, shop steward work, the kind of tough labor management bargaining processes that will give stronger background and backbone and more muscle to the emerging South African black trade union movement; programs of training and supporting the emerging black South African business class (and we're putting money into training and skills across the board in this field); and direct American interventions in the human rights field. Money is being spent on literally dozens of projects that promote respect for human rights inside South Africa and we're doing it officially.

In addition, this government is directly involved in the South African marketplace, engaging in investments that strengthen the hands of those who are fighting to change South Africa. We also want to encourage other Americans indirectly to participate in this policy by giving them an umbrella to be under. I will only cite one instance here, and that is the role that American corporations can play inside South Africa to set standards of fair labor practice and standards of promotion in the job place to permit black South Africans to advance as rapidly as possible — standards that can be emulated by the broader South African economic community. In a sense business has been ahead of government in this, but we want to strengthen that capacity for business to take something like the Sullivan codes and carry them out, thereby holding up a beacon around which others can look and move. We have seen, through the emergence of European codes or internal South African industry codes such as the Barlow-Rand Code, a genuine movement in South African industry, foreign owned or domestically owned, towards a new deal on the market place — and this is all part of the process of change.

Finally, constructive engagement really starts from an assumption — one which I think is valid and that serious students of the South African situation also see as valid — that South Africa is a land undergoing quite extraordinary changes in many, many ways, such as movements of population and upward mobility for blacks. The future of South Africa cannot be like the past. There are motors of reality that are turning over right now that are impelling government to make decisions and impelling that society to move forward. This administration wants to put itself on the side of those motors of change, wants to back that change, wants to be relevant to change. It wants very deeply in a time of despair to be able to light a candle in an environment of considerable darkness, not to back away, not to wash its hands, but to be relevant to what goes on inside South Africa.

FORUM: On the subject of economic ties with South Africa, virtually

all black nationalist leaders from Nelson Mandela to Steve Biko have resolutely opposed foreign investments. How do you respond to their arguments that investments and trade links merely bolster the apartheid regime and that divestment would be a more effective means of inducing change in the country?

WISNER: I believe there are a number of spokesmen of black South African opinion and I suggest that there are many who are not arguing for divestment. To the contrary, there are many important spokesmen of black South African opinion who argue quite the contrary. I think it would be interesting if you took a look at the results of a very thorough and important study of black South African opinion that was just completed: the Schlemmer Report. The Report delves into the attitudes of black South African workers in some detail, and it comes out with two main points: that black South African opinion is strongly mobilized behind the opposition to apartheid — and there is no question about that — but that seventy-eight percent of black South Africans polled in the study are against divestment. Against divestment because they conclude, I would assume, that divestment has a number of consequences, almost all of which would be adverse to the prospects of black South Africans. So I don't think the case is as open and shut as you would suggest in referring to particular points of view, albeit perfectly valid ones and ones that we all will listen to and have listened to.

Divestment in my judgement is not the way to go. Divestment is walking away from a problem, not working to solve that problem. Divestment would mean that American corporations would dump their assets, assets which would be picked up at practically firesale prices; and a constructive force for change would be denied inside South Africa. Divestment means a lack of expanded opportunities for black South Africans, and that means less leverage for black South Africans to play a role inside their society. Even if it were successful, and I question the wisdom of that assumption, divestment would mean less investment going in to fuel the motors of the economy in the rest of southern Africa; for the linkages between the South African economy and the economies in the neighboring states are so deep and so strong that Zambia's health, Mozambique's health, Zimbabwe's health, and the economic health of all the neighboring states are tied directly to the health of the South African economy.

FORUM: In view of the fact that there is no evidence to suggest that there has been a fundamental change in the racial ideology of the South African regime, and that after the so-called constitutional reforms 72%

of the population is still disenfranchised, and in light of criticisms by numerous South African blacks of constructive engagement, most recently by Bishop Tutu, do you think the policy as a whole has a viable future?

WISNER: I have no question the policy has a viable future and I am perfectly prepared to take criticism. I think we're trying to cope with very difficult problems, but if you go back to my definition of constructive engagement, you will see that it has a regional dimension, it has a Namibian independence dimension, and it has a South African dimension. The United States has already made some progress and will continue to work toward Namibia's independence; there has been serious progress in the region towards rules of coexistence and detente and peace between the states — that's all positive and that's all part of constructive engagement. Inside South Africa itself I believe we are making as much of a contribution as an external power can; we do not rule or control South Africa nor can we call the shots in that foreign country any more than we can in any other country, but I think our influence is felt and our voice is heard and that we are playing a positive and useful role in backing change. You asserted earlier that there has been a complete lack of change inside South Africa; I think that assumption is open to very, very strong question.

FORUM: I was pointing out that there has been no change in the political participation on the part of the blacks.

WISNER: I agree that there has not been a move towards political participation on the part of the blacks that the United States would consider significant and we have made it extremely clear that even this latest constitutional development leaves a most flawed constitution; flawed because of its failure to recognize the political aspirations and rights of black South Africans. Moreover, the very existence of a Constitution which fails to take those aspirations into account builds animosity and antagonism, and we're seeing that on the streets of South Africa today. We recognize that. But I ask you to reflect briefly on the fact that there are consequences to decisions like the new Constitution, and we will all have to watch and see how they play out. But start with one, the assumption of apartheid from its founding, or its institutionalization in 1948 when the National Party came to power. The assumption was there would be only one group that would exercise political power in South Africa and that was to be South Africa's white population. The new Constitution says no, there must at least be three groups. Once you move away from the concept that there is only one party to the problem

that can exercise power and you accept that other parties can also exercise power, I suggest that you must consider what will happen over time. My own view is that over time there will be irresistible pressure to find formulas for power sharing inside South Africa; once your boat is on that stream you can't turn back, and I'd like to think that as difficult as it's going to be and as painful as it's going to be, a path of change has been charted, even in political terms.

FORUM: I think most people would agree that change is inevitable in South Africa and the remaining questions are how and when. I would like to ask you two related questions, since America seems to have a history, at least in Africa, of supporting the losing side in struggles of liberation. Isn't there a danger that when a black majority government comes to power, the interests of the U.S. will be harmed? Secondly, since most African states have called on the U.S. to sever its ties with South Africa how will its continued association affect future relations with other African states?

WISNER: Well, I find the assertion contrary to my understanding of the situation. I think many states in Africa want the United States to use its influence to bring about change. In several years in my present job I have yet to be approached by anyone who said that we should sever ties with South Africa. Rather, Africans expect the United States to be involved in bringing about a change within South Africa, not to back away from the problem and leave South Africa to rot on its own. That said, let me come back to the earlier part of your question. As we began this interview we both agreed that the United States has very strong interests in the continent which are not of a transitory nature. The United States has a capacity to live with African governments of all sorts and to maintain very strong and very cooperative relations. It is an article of our faith that we do not choose and pick our friends on the basis of the system of government or political ideology which they have chosen. The United States has equally strong relationships with Marxist Mozambique on the one hand and free-enterprise Ivory Coast on the other. Because we have national interests and we are not engaged in ideological warfare, we have a capacity to make friends, to carry out relationships, to build ties with all sorts of African nations. The course that this administration has been on, I would suggest, is rather similar to courses that its predecessors have followed. So while we have views about what produces greater efficiency in an economic sense inside African countries and we share those views in a candid, friendly manner in which African governments of their own sovereign right pick and choose what policies make

sense to them, we will operate and do operate with very strong relationships with the broadest spectrum of African political opinion.

FORUM: The foreign policy of this administration, in particular, has been criticized for being couched in the context of East-West rivalry. In its policy towards southern Africa, this is seen most forcefully in its linking of South African withdrawal from Namibia to the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. Do you see this as a weakness of U.S. policy? Might it not harm prospects for independence of Namibia?

WISNER: I would like the critics or those who assert this charge to look at the evidence before the charge is repeated. The evidence is very strong and it shows that the United States must have a relationship with the continent of Africa and the United States must be relevant to the problems that the nations of that continent face, whether they be security problems or political problems or economic problems. It is simply not possible or rational to conduct a policy that is based on elements external to the continent's own interests if you are ever going to be able to maintain a pattern of relationships. American policies in Africa today recognize that fact very strongly. At the same time, Africa is not an island or another planet. Africa is part of this universe and this universe, all too sadly, is afflicted with a number of contentious issues, including the East-West issue. One would be mad not to assume that the East-West issue has not found its way into the African continent. It very well has; that is part of an overall puzzle. But the guiding force of American policy, be it in Saharan Africa or the horn of Africa or southern Africa, has to be on solving problems that the continent needs to have solved.

Now, come to southern Africa for a moment. I think you do considerable injustice to the situation facing southern Africa if you put it quite the way you did. The United States' policy has been aimed at getting a South African agreement to the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435 in a manner that will produce Namibia's independence. South Africa has stated that it is prepared to implement 435, if an agreement can be reached on Cuban forces. You do substantial injustice to the position of the Republic of Angola, which has said publicly in the name of its President that it is willing to move to an agreement to implement 435 and in that context, reach an agreement on the withdrawal of Cuban forces. The Angolan government made the decision to unblock the peace process and move facts along, and I don't see why outsiders need to question a sovereign decision by an African government to move in that manner.

FORUM: You mention the sovereign government of Angola, yet the U.S. has never recognized that government and has no diplomatic relations with it. Does not the fact of non-recognition and all of the problems related to it aggravate the problems in that region?

WISNER: No, I don't think so. Let me tell you why. I think the issue of United States recognition of the government of Angola is a policy issue of long standing. It was a policy position first outlined in the administration of President Ford, it was maintained during President Carter's time, and there has been no change during President Reagan's time. We did not recognize the government of Angola or exchange diplomatic representatives because at the time of Angola's independence there was a foreign army on the scene which created its own reality and its own problems. We made it very clear then and have consistently expressed through three administrations, that when Angola was free of that problem, an American diplomatic relationship would be part of the outcome. Now I believe the Angolan government, with whom we meet regularly and have had the most intensive negotiations over the past several years, understands fully the American view. They also understand in what context the problem of diplomatic representation will be set aside. It is not an issue of burning passion in the negotiation right now. It will be solved in its own good time if the negotiation moves on in the basically positive way that it has been moving in recent weeks and months. So I don't think that that factor has slowed down or blocked move toward a settlement.

FORUM: Does the U.S. maintain any contact with any of the liberation movements in South Africa such as the African National Congress, and is any support given to them?

WISNER: We support black South Africans in a number of different ways. I described a variety of programs we have undertaken inside South Africa. There are education programs, support programs, and scholarship programs for black South Africans who are outside of the Republic of South Africa. We also maintain a dialogue with many black leaders and black South African groups. American officials meet with externally based groups as well as a variety of groups inside South Africa.

FORUM: Turning now to the Horn of Africa and the famine and drought afflicting the region, what role is the U.S. playing in the alleviation of suffering?

WISNER: We are engaged in a massive food program which has risen sharply under this administration as Africa's own food circumstances have worsened. Food aid has been provided in the Sahel and southern and southeastern Africa as well. In fact, there is not a food deficit area in Africa that has not been receiving American food assistance, with more increases anticipated. The President recently announced a major program providing more than one hundred thousand tons of food for Kenya and seventy-five thousand tons for Mozambique, as part of an on-going process of announcements of American response to the food crisis.

Food crisis is particularly acute in Ethiopia today. We are looking at thousands of people dying every week of hunger. We are in the process, as you and I sit here today, of negotiating an agreement with the relief commissioner from Ethiopia, and will be announcing a major increase in the Ethiopian program. We are working with the Ethiopian Government and its relief agencies and through private, voluntary agencies. We are making contributions in transportation, in distribution, and in technical assistance to move the food to Ethiopia as rapidly as possible and to make sure it is circulated among Ethiopia's distressed populations. The United States will be at the lead of the world's effort despite our political differences with the Ethiopian regime.

FORUM: What consideration is given to the role of the Organization of African Unity in determining U.S. policy toward the continent? Is it used as an indicator of the shifting attitudes in policies and groupings among the different states?

WISNER: The OAU has long been an institution that has had support and understanding from the United States, and we would like to see it strong and functioning. It has been an institution which has provided a forum for the amicable resolution of African regional difficulties. It has been a forum in which Africa could think together about tough economic and social problems, and that has received American response and support. I think the sad fact that Africa faces, and as a friend of Africa the United States faces today, is that for the last several years the OAU has been divided on some key issues; on the Western Sahara, on Chad, and on the leadership issue — who should be the chairman and how the OAU should function. We would like to see those issues overcome, see Africa get the OAU back together again in strong standing and provide us with a good, valid interlocutor and counterpart to work with.

FORUM: I will finish with a general question. The pattern of U.S. policy toward Africa since the Second World War has been regarded by some

as episodic and by others as haphazard. What steps have been taken to achieve a more consistent and coherent policy?

WISNER: I think that is a very good question. There are obviously broad policy dispositions toward the continent. We have talked about several today; American relevance to the continent's security problems or its political problems or its very deep economic problems, American relevance to a burning issue like the food problem. Yet Africa is, as you suggest, a continent of great diversity and therefore we have to adopt coherent policies to deal with that diversity rather than episodic intervention. We have talked about a number of the policies we have adopted in the course of this administration. I believe the United States reached a major turning point in its policy directions with the continent about midway through the last decade and there is never going to be a turning back now. In the years to come, this country is going to have policies of growing importance and of growing impact on its relationship with all of the continent of Africa.